

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: CONSUMING THE (POSTMODERN) SELF:  
SNEAKER CUSTOMIZATION AND THE  
SYMBOLIC CREATION OF MEANING AND  
IDENTITY

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With regard to the centrality of symbolic cultural consumption in late capitalism (Jameson, 1991; Mandel, 1978), this thesis broadly details how consumers negotiate meaning and construct identity through engagement with cultural commodities. I examine this phenomenon through the athletic sneaker: a commodity that's value largely derives from the cultural meanings it exhibits (Baudrillard, 1983; Miner, 2009; Turner, 2015). Specifically, I analyze sneaker customization, or the act of personal modification of traditional sneakers. Drawing from 15 in-depth interviews with individuals who have experience with sneaker customization, I explicate the various meanings that participants attach to sneaker customization, along with articulating its emergence, current position, implications and significance within its broader sociocultural contexts. This thesis contributes to understandings of how everyday individuals engage with popular cultural practices – such as sneaker customization – to create and define the means of their existence amidst the societal conditions with which they are confronted (Hall, 1996).

CONSUMING THE (POSTMODERN) SELF: SNEAKER CUSTOMIZATION  
AND THE SYMBOLIC CREATION OF MEANING AND IDENTITY

By

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## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

I wish I could say that my first pair of customized sneakers was a work of art. Even better, I wish I could call it an early form of symbolic creative cultural subversion, predictive of some subliminal-yet-burgeoning political consciousness. Unfortunately, in hindsight, my first pair of customized sneakers was just a desperate (and overpriced) attempt to be ‘cool.’ After developing into an ideal, neoliberal consumer citizen and becoming cognizant of my style and appearance, I became convinced I needed a pair of sneakers that went beyond protecting my feet. Further, I wanted a pair of sneakers that would be rife with expressive symbolism; a pair capable of making a statement about who I was and what I could become. While consciously telling myself that I was searching for sneakers that represented my distinct individuality (unencumbered by the judgements of my peers), I subconsciously searched for a pair that *others* would most acknowledge as remarkable. Ironically, I aimed to construct my distinct individuality, through blatant conformity to adolescent fashion norms.

In attempting to experience for myself the euphoria that those around me seemed to gain from having symbolic sneakers, I looked to popular culture for my model of consumption. Specifically, I looked for the type of sneakers being worn by people who looked like me, seeking to emulate the styles of the athletes, musicians, and entertainers that I admired. So when I customized the latest model of sneakers from my favorite player and role model, hometown-NBA-star Derrick Rose, I did not use the allotted text characters on Adidas’s design page to write my own name, number, or a personal

message. Instead I wrote “ROSE #1”<sup>1</sup> and added a Chicago Bulls logo. Looking back in a critical sense, I always ask: Why did I personalize my shoes this way? Why was my fandom of Derrick Rose so central to my identity, and why did I need people to know it? Why did I need to express identity via symbolic consumer commodities in the first place? Was my customization an act of wielding everyday objects to create meaning, or did I only customize those specific sneakers because the meaning was determined for me by commercial interests?

The complexities are clear upon reflection. The option to personalize shoes grants one the opportunity to design their shoes in a way to express individual style and identity, yet I personalized my sneakers in a way that associated myself with the preferences of my peers and favorite athletes. Additionally, I customized through Adidas, a company who I will argue historically has only been interested in athletes like Derrick Rose for his capability to attract young, African-American males like me. What I thought was an autonomous creation of meaning and significance was mediated by an industry for whom I was both a target consumer, and a reliable source of profit. Though, in my case, the meanings of sneaker customization seemed to be determined by the sneaker industry, I became curious as to whether the meanings of sneaker customization for others were generated with more autonomy.

### 1.1 Contextualizing the Sneaker in Late Capitalism

The athletic sneaker has developed into an acknowledged exemplar of a late-capitalist society in which culture has itself become a commodity that is produced and

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<sup>1</sup> My favorite number, and consistent number for sports, was always 14. Derrick Rose’s number was 1. My original message was “Rose #14” (favorite player + favorite number) until I realized that pairing would cause confusion and detract from my appeal to Rose. Tormented by this dilemma, Rose eventually won out over my love for the #14.

consumed (Jameson, 1991; Mandel, 1978). In late capitalism, the once-distinct cultural and economic realms have collapsed onto a single plane, generating the commercialization of culture and the culturalization of the economy (Jameson, 1991; Mandel, 1978). The result of this collapse has been the expansive commodification of what Marx and Engels (1972) referred to as the “superstructure” (including elements such as art, sport, education, etc.) that the economic “base” of earlier stages of capitalism has left largely untouched. This reduction of culture to market logics simultaneously produced, and relied upon, a shift in how commodities are valued by consumers. Commodities in earlier forms of capitalism were evaluated according to their use-value (or their ability to fulfill their intended purpose), which informed their exchange-value (or their value in comparison to other commodities in the market) (Marx, 1977). However, scholars argue that late-capitalist commodities are increasingly defined by their *sign-value*, or the communicative cultural meanings, prestige, social status, and affective associations that are indicated by the use or possession of a commodity (Baudrillard, 1981; Brennan, 2004). In an aesthetically-driven society in which symbolic consumption of cultural commodities has become a defining factor in the construction and expression of identity and belonging, sign-value has replaced use-value as the key indicator of market appraisal and consumer demand (Baudrillard, 1983; Featherstone, 2007; Miles, 1998).

Sign-value, because of its centrality to consumerism, is often cultivated by commercial interests with the intent of imbuing commodities with artificially-constructed, yet commercially-profitable, *cultural* meaning. The effect of infusing meaning into commodities is beyond a mere stimulation of demand from consumers.



Rather, it often entrenches the meanings of commodities into dominant ‘ideology,’ which Althusser (1971) defines as the representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. In other words, the arbitrary meanings infused into commodities by those selling them are often uncritically assumed to be natural to those commodities. Kukla (2002) argues that ideologies are “systems of ideas that function to culturally inscribe a naturalized understanding of some social phenomenon that actually has its origins in a history of interests, human actions, and contingent social conditions” (cited in Wright & Roberts, 2013; p. 568). Ideology often presents social relations as the natural, objective reality rather than the product of intentional human action. With regard to consumerism, the manipulation of the meanings of commodities by late-capitalist culture industries obfuscates the fact that the meanings are not essential to the commodities, but are constructed in a manner that is profitable for those selling them.

Despite this manipulation occurring in the abstract, ideology has a material effect. Ideology has the power to “interpellate” and drive them to action (Althusser, 1971). Interpellation refers to the way in which ideological messages position or construct individuals as consumers of an ideological message (Althusser, 1971). Hall (1980) argued that interpellation occurs often when individuals engage with media texts. He pointed especially to television, arguing that when an individual chooses to consume a show or movie uncritically, that text interpellates the individual to a certain set of assumptions that tacitly constitutes their position within society (Wright & Roberts, 2013). Among these media texts are televised advertisements, such as advertisements for sneakers. Each media text, according to Hall (1980), is embedded with cultural messages that often “reflect or express the values of the economic base and, therefore, the dominant

culture of society” (Procter, 2004; p. 17). The moment that an individual acknowledges and responds to these ideological messages, the individual becomes the subject of the message and the ideology is granted legitimacy. The effect is that individuals come to recognize and understand themselves through these constructed messages. Interpellation, then, “[makes] us feel we are free to choose while actually choosing on our behalf” (Procter, 2004; p. 16). Scholars argue that the ideological positioning of commodities often determines the ways in which consumers understand them, interact with them, and are subjectified through engagement with them (Baudrillard, 1983; Jhally, 1989; Slater, 1997). The ideological positioning of sneakers has mirrored this trend.

The significance of the athletic sneaker derives from its carefully-constructed symbolic image within popular culture. Although sneakers once relied on use-value, their allure in contemporary culture lies in their ability to serve as an expressive signifier of meaning, identity and status (Vanderbilt, 1998). Specifically, scholars have argued that sneaker consumption is driven by their status as a signifier of style, masculinity, sporting aptitude, racial identity, and/or subcultural status (Miner, 2009; Wilson, 1996). These meanings are not random, nor an organic creation from those who have worn sneakers (with some exceptions<sup>2</sup>). Although the significations of sneakers may seem innate and universal, their sign-value was constituted in a specific way by the sneaker industry. Miller (1998) writes that mass-produced fashion and clothing “incorporate a common cultural knowledge concerning the meanings constituted in them” (p. 99), for which those who produce and design the consumer goods have a disproportionate influence in

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<sup>2</sup> As described later in the overview of literature and theory, certain subcultures bestowed novel meanings to sneakers without the knowledge or intention of the sneaker brands selling them. This autonomy was short-lived though, as the sneaker brands eventually caught on and utilized those subcultural meanings to market to mainstream society (Turner, 2015).

shaping. As Williams (1961) points out, when culture is commercially exploited, it is difficult to decipher when cultural forms are authentic or manufactured. In the case of sneakers, the dominant meanings were primarily manufactured from the sneaker industry's creative mobilization of media, marketing, and advertising to ideologically position the sneaker and thereby constitute consumer identity, construct a positive affective association, stimulate consumption, expand market share, and ultimately enhance profit (Turner, 2015; Vanderbilt, 1998). Though this ideological positioning occurred in the abstract, its effects are certainly material.

Wilson (1996) found that the sneaker industry was largely successful in entrenching these commercially-favorable meanings, and provoking the consumer engagement with sneakers that it sought. Young black males especially were interpellated by these symbolic messages and were receptive to the commercial portrayal of sneakers as essential to blackness (Vanderbilt, 1998). This, of course, was not an attempt at authentic representation. Rather, it was a commercial 'encoding' (Hall, 1980) intended to stimulate black consumption, as well as consumption from those fascinated with emulating blackness<sup>3</sup> (Yousman, 2003). Still, the ideological entrenchment of these commercial meanings drove young black males to consume the most symbolically-rich, and therefore most expensive, sneakers (Wilson, 1996). The legacy of the industry's historical tendency to associate their sneakers with arbitrary racial meaning was a determinant of how individuals understood and acted upon sneakers. Since the 1990s, however, little research has examined the cultural politics of contemporary sneaker

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<sup>3</sup> This is an example of sneaker industry using subcultural meaning to sell to those outside of it. In this case, the sneaker industry often used the status of sneakers in hip-hop culture to sell a form of blackness to those who were simultaneously fascinated with and fearful of blackness (Andrews & Silk, 2010). This will also be described later.

consumption, despite significant physical and symbolic shifts in sneaker industry production.

### 1.2 Gaps in Literature: Sneaker Customization

Previous research on the cultural uses and meanings of sneakers has only considered traditional sneakers, or sneakers that have been fully designed, produced, and released by companies in the sneaker industry (such as *Air Jordan*'s produced by Nike, *Superstars* produced by Adidas, *All Stars* produced by Converse, etc). Little research to this point has considered the uses and meanings of 'customized sneakers', referring to sneakers to which individuals have added personalized designs and messages (Moser et al., 2006). Additionally, the process of creating customized sneakers, or sneaker customization, is a phenomenon that has been occurring for decades but has lacked scholarly analysis.

Sneaker customization occurs on two levels. The first level is the 'street' level, referring to customization done individually by hand or through a professional customizer. The second is the 'industry' level, referring to customization designed and purchased online through industry website platforms, such as NikeID, miAdidas, or Under Armour *Icon*<sup>4</sup>. Customization on the street level has occurred since the emergence of sneaker culture in the 1980s, while industry customization originated in 2000, 2012, and 2017 for Adidas, Nike, and Under Armour respectively. Perhaps due to the relative novelty of these forms, little research has examined the process or products created by sneaker customization. Further, little research has critically analyzed the broader

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<sup>4</sup> See Barker, 2019 for a brief history of the "customization race" between these brands.

sociocultural effects of sneaker customization, articulated the factors of its emergence, or considered its role in shaping consumer behaviors, attitudes, and identities.

More broadly, much of the theorizing on the meanings of consumerism has been highly deterministic and pessimistic. In much of the literature, the meanings that everyday consumers attach to commodities are derived unproblematically from some stable, universal determinant; whether that be ideology (Althusser, 1971), labor production (Marx, 1977), signifying culture (Baudrillard, 1983), top-down emulation (Veblen, 1926), subconscious hedonism (Campbell, 1994) or habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), to name a few<sup>5</sup>. However, I agree with Willis (1990) when he states that the meaning given to cultural commodities is neither fixed nor guaranteed in advance, and evolves as individuals engage with commodities in different contexts. Consumption, along with sneaker customization, is certainly an active site in which the “struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged” (Hall, 1981; p. 239). While the creation of meaning is never completely divorced from the power of ideology, individuals can (and do) exercise agency through the realm of popular culture by making meaning on their own terms. I approach this thesis with the conviction that individuals are not just blind consumers of culture, but active producers of it (Miller, 2001). As Gramsci argued, individuals have agency to operate within their social structures to create their own meanings and experiences (Andrews & Loy, 1993). Little research, to this point, has examined the enactment of consumer agency through an active and conscious process of commodity creation and appropriation, such as sneaker customization. In attempting to counter the trend of over-determinism in consumerism literature, I engage Paul Willis’ (1990) theory

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<sup>5</sup> These theories will all be explained in the overview of literature and theory.

of “symbolic creativity” that focuses on the creation of meaning on an everyday, ordinary level.

### 1.3 Conceptual Framework: Symbolic Creativity

Overall, this thesis will engage (and at times, “wrestle” with [Hall, 1992]) Paul Willis’ theoretical framework of symbolic creative consumption. The central argument of this thesis is that sneaker customization should be understood as a form of what Willis (1990) calls ‘symbolic creativity’ for common consumers. In his book *Common Culture*, Willis argues that individuals often exercise symbolic creativity in everyday life. This action occurs on the level of what he calls common culture, which consists of the shared, ordinary existences of those excluded from the modernist hierarchy of culture. As Hall (1993) explains, within the traditional cultural hierarchy, what is considered to be popular culture is defined as the opposite of refined and respected high culture, and vice versa. Willis explains this cultural hierarchy through the arts institution, arguing that there has traditionally existed a problematic assumption that some forms of culture are ‘high’ or ‘elite’, while others have been deemed ‘low’ or ‘common’<sup>6</sup>. This assumption states that what is elite art is “special and heightened”, intrinsically good, to be privileged, protected, appreciated, and kept isolated from what is considered “ordinary and everyday” low art that is intrinsically bad (Willis, 1990; p. 1). Willis argues that this assumption proclaimed the notion that what historically counted as high art should be relegated to museums or galleries, divorced from living contexts and preserved from what was feared to be the debasement of exposure to the ‘uncultured’ populist masses of

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<sup>6</sup> Throughout this thesis, I will use “high” and “elite” interchangeably to describe forms of culture viewed favorably by the traditional cultural hierarchy. I will use “low” and “common” interchangeably to describe forms of popular culture viewed negatively by the traditional cultural hierarchy.

low culture. As Willis (1990) states, regarding the assumption about the existence of a cultural hierarchy: “the appreciation of official art (its consumption) further depends on the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge... the ‘others’, the ‘uncultured’, merely lack the code, but they’re seen and may sometimes see themselves as ignorant, insensitive, and without finer sensibilities of those who really ‘appreciate’” (p. 2-3). What has historically been given value and deemed legitimate high art was not a product of transcendent artistry; rather, it was often a product of the social status of those who predominantly produced and consumed it. Nonetheless, those who consumed on the low, ‘ordinary’ level were assumed to be uncultured, passive, and incapable of appreciating – let alone, creating for themselves – art that carried significant cultural meaning.

The core of Willis’ argument is that this assumption is false. Those of common culture – especially, he contended, young, working-class individuals in their formative years – produce and consume their own version of art through the creative and open-ended process of using commodities to make meaning on an ordinary, everyday level. Willis writes that “most young people’s lives are not involved with the arts and yet are actually full of expressions, signs, and symbols through which individuals and groups seek creatively to establish their presence, identity, and meaning... expressing or attempting to express something about their actual or potential *cultural significance*” (p. 1, italics in original). In constructing and expressing identity and searching for this significance, Willis argues that individuals “use, humanize, decorate, or invest with meaning their common and immediate life spaces and social practices, [such as] personal style and choice of clothes” (p. 2). Mass culture does not necessarily massify; it often provides the necessary conditions for individuals of common culture to meaningfully

express agency. The point of examining common cultural expression, for Willis, is to understand how elements of everyday culture are used and given meaning by and for everyday people.

Willis (1990) calls the process of meaning-making through commodities ‘symbolic work’, which he defines more precisely as “the application of human capacities to and through, on and with symbolic resources and raw materials (collections of signs and symbols) ... to produce meaning” (p. 10). Symbolic work is not a sporadic, superfluous, random endeavor. For Willis, it is an essential, necessary daily activity for humans, as communicative beings, of which the purpose is to “ensure the daily production and reproduction of human existence” (p. 9). Symbolic work has four essential elements for Willis: 1) language as a practice and symbolic resource, serving as a primary instrument for communicating, interacting, and showing solidarity with others; 2) the active body as a practice and symbolic resource, serving as a site of somatic knowledge, signs, symbols, and feelings; 3) drama as a practice and symbolic resource, serving as dramaturgical form of communication through the embodiment of roles, rituals, and performances; and 4) most important, symbolic creativity, serving as the driving force of assembling the prior three elements to produce meaning with the intent of “remaking the world for ourselves as we [low, common culture] make and find our own place and identity” (p. 11).

The end product of these four ‘tools’ of symbolic work for Willis is threefold. First, it results in the creation of identity, both as it exists in the current moment and what it could become in the future. Second, it allows for the placement of that identity in the context of culture, history, and broader society, while materially representing collectivity



or difference within those contexts. Third, it develops and unleashes the empowerment of the individual to make a positive mark, however minutely, on their world as they understand it (Willis, 1990). Overall, symbolic creativity allows for individuals to make sense of themselves and grasp their place within the wider, sometimes-debilitating processes of a late capitalist, post-Fordist economy and postmodern cultural condition (Jameson, 1991; Mumby, 2013); processes such as “secularization, consumerism, individualization, decollectivization, weakening respect for authority, and new technologies of production and distribution” (Willis, 1990; p. 13). Contrary to other pessimists of postmodernism that I will discuss later (such as Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard) these overarching social, cultural, and economic processes provoke a sense of optimism for Willis as they allow the individual to create for themselves new, alternative identities and meanings in everyday cultural practices. Willis provides a theoretical framework for understanding the potential of sneaker customization, as a form of creative artistic expression, to construct meaning and identity. However, the *specific* meanings, identities, and significance that consumers construct through sneaker customization has not yet been identified or articulated within its broader contexts.

#### 1.4 Research Questions

The broad aim of this project is to understand how consumers enact agency through symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990) in negotiation with commercially-constructed ideologies (Althusser, 1971) within the context of a post-Fordist economy (Amin, 1994) and postmodern cultural condition (Jameson, 1991). The process of sneaker customization is a site through which I examine these processes. My overarching research question is:

**In what ways do consumers construct and express meaning and identity through sneaker customization within a postmodern, post-Fordist, late capitalist society?**

Within this general question, I answer four sub-questions:

1. How do individuals understand sneaker customization, and why do they engage in it?
2. What symbolic meanings do individuals attach to the process and products of sneaker customization?
3. In what ways has sneaker customization influenced consumer identities, attitudes, and behaviors?
4. To what extent is sneaker customization an expression of consumer agency in response to, in spite of, or in accordance with its broader cultural, economic, political, and ideological contexts?

To answer these questions, I conducted in-depth interviews with 15 individuals who have experience with sneaker customization that I recruited at two local sneaker conventions.

After transcribing and coding the interviews, I utilized thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2006) with a social constructivist methodological paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) to produce eight themes from the data (four for each section of the analysis). In addition, I employ the cultural studies methods of articulation to ‘radically contextualize’ (Grossberg, 2006) the ways in which sneaker customization, as a form of symbolic creativity, is influenced by broader sociocultural processes of postmodernism, post-Fordism, and consumer culture.

### 1.5 Project Significance

This thesis, as a Physical Cultural Studies (PCS) project, is not concerned with sneaker customization for its own sake. Rather, it merges theoretical, empirical, methodological, and political frameworks in order to examine sneaker customization as a site for exploring the everyday complexities of a consumption-obsessed late capitalist society. Andrews (2002) argues that cultural practices are products, and simultaneous constitutors, of their context. Because of this, to thoroughly understand the significance of a culture practice requires tracing its “conjunctural relations, identity, and effects to produce a contextually specific map of the social formation” (p. 114). In drawing upon and contributing to literature regarding sneakers, fashion, consumerism, postmodernism, and the cultural politics of race, this thesis positions sneaker customization as product and producer of a postmodern cultural condition, post-Fordist economy, and an aesthetically-driven consumer culture. It is through the social formation that is identified by understanding the conjunction of sneaker customization that the operations of power within a late capitalist consumer society can be revealed.

Additionally, this thesis analyzes the ways in which popular cultural practices, such as sneaker customization, can be engaged as a site of through which individuals define the means of their existence. Hall (1996) argues that culture should be defined neither through an extreme ‘structural’ view, which identifies culture as a direct extension of ideology, nor through an extreme ‘cultural’ view, which identifies culture as an autonomous invention free from existing power structures. Instead, Hall writes that culture should be defined as “both the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and

relationships, through which they 'handle' and respond to the conditions of existence; and as the lived traditions and practices through which those 'understandings' are expressed and in which they are embodied” (1996; p. 35). Analyzing sneaker customization, as one of these lived traditions and practices, can provide understanding into how those of common culture negotiate, express, embody, and symbolically create (Willis, 1990) the conditions of their existence. Overall, in responding to the PCS call for exposure of and intervention into iniquitous relations of power (Andrews, 2008), this project will conscientize (Freire, 2000) readers of the complex interplay of identity, symbolic culture, power, and ideology within late capitalism, in hopes of stimulating exercises of individual agency and self-actualization.

### 1.6 Project Overview

This thesis is organized by the following outline. Chapter Two will merge relevant theory and literature to explain four key contexts for articulating sneaker customization: postmodernism, consumer culture, post-Fordism, and the history of the sneaker industry. These contexts provide the foundation for my methodological framework and empirical analysis. Chapter Three will outline this methodological framework, specifically discussing my postmodern, social constructivist paradigm, explaining thematic analysis and articulation, and detailing the specific procedures and methodological decisions made within my research. Chapter Four outlines the results of my research. After providing relevant context of where and how my interviews took place, my empirical analysis is split into two sections: the first discussing the meanings individuals attach to sneaker customization, and the second discussing the specific conditions of sneaker culture and the broader conditions of society in which sneaker

customization emerged as a significant practice. Each of these sections has four themes that explicate general patterns of my interview data. I conclude this thesis with Chapter Five, in which I summarize my findings, specify my thoughts on the analysis, and further position my results within the Physical Cultural Studies project.

## CHAPTER TWO: Overview of Literature and Theory

In this section, I describe the various social, cultural, political, and economic contexts that are most useful in understanding and analyzing the phenomenon of sneaker customization. Moving from the broad to the specific, these contexts include: the current wave of capitalism known as *late capitalism*, its cultural condition of postmodernism, the development of contemporary consumer culture, the economic landscape of post-Fordism, and the history of the sneaker industry. In explaining these processes, I weave theoretical frameworks and arguments with relevant literature in order to ultimately explain the role of these processes in the framing of my methodology and the results of my analysis.

### 2.1 Postmodernism and Late Capitalism

The significance of sneaker customization is a product of its existence within a late capitalist economy and a postmodern cultural condition. I will first discuss postmodernism in order to position its role within late capitalism. To even provide a comprehensive definition of postmodernism is, by postmodern standards, paradoxical. Yet the utility of postmodernism derives less from its validity as a concrete definition than as an analytical tool for examining specific elements of broader culture (Buchanan, 2006). Since postmodernism is an “antifoundational mode of theorizing” (Featherstone, 2007; p. 137) in relation to modernism’s foundational thinking, it may be most sensible to explain postmodernism as a negative concept to modernism’s positive definition (although they are not completely antithetical). What I will refer to as *modern* comprises

of various social, political and economic philosophies, values, and ideas of the era beginning with the Western Enlightenment and presiding, to some extent, into the present-day. These ideals, many of which have been at the forefront of collective Western thought and undergird our most prominent institutions, include: the rational, calculated individual; belief in objective truth and reality; inevitable human progress achievable by means of scientific and technological innovation; emphasis on freedom and liberty of the individual; the 'self-made man' who achieved success through hard work and the free market; private property; industry; and reason above all (Slater, 1997). Lyotard (1984) argues that many of these epistemological foundations, which he refers to as meta-narratives, are insufficient in their claims to a universal knowledge that he argues does not exist. Instead, knowledge should be accepted as limited, diverse, and contingent. Intellectuals, then, should seek to interpret phenomena in a deconstructive manner rather than produce meta-narratives that ultimately will fail to achieve universality (Lyotard, 1988).

Postmodernism, in somewhat of a sporadic and ironic fashion, generally subverts, extends, transcends or outright rejects many of modernism's meta-narratives. Philosophically, postmodernism understands truth and reality to be subjective and rejects the authority of anyone or anything to provide a grand narrative that holistically explains the ontological state of any phenomenon (Featherstone, 2007). Postmodernism rejects the modernist hegemony of reason and rationality, and instead embraces irrationality, contradiction, irony, impulse, and subjectivity. It acknowledges and accepts disorder rather than what is perceived as the façade of modernist order. Postmodernism rejects hierarchization of traditional classificatory structures, directly or indirectly advocating for

a more equitable landscape of voice, representation, and culture. The postmodern individual generally values spontaneous lifestyle over predetermined social structure, the symbolic over the perceived authentic, expressive identity over structured niche, difference over similarity, eclecticism over specificity, experience over materiality, style over function, and ultimately emphasizes the cultural realm (Slater, 1997, Featherstone, 2007)

At its etymological origin, the term postmodernism was associated primarily with the fine arts, encompassing trends and stylistic representations that broke away from, or moved beyond, traditional modernist works. Frederic Jameson (1991), attempting to provide an articulation of the base-superstructure relationship of his epoch, referred to postmodernism as the “cultural logic” of what Ernest Mandel (1978) termed “late capitalism.” Jameson relied on Mandel’s analysis of the long-waves in the evolving state of capitalism. Drawing from Marx’s view that the capitalist market self-reconciled its crises of overproduction and under-consumption through recessions that occurred every 7-10 years, Mandel argued that the market also experiences long-term reconciliations (of about 50 years) between the rate of profit and the means of capital accumulation (Heffernan, 2000). Mandel (1978) observed three long waves of capitalism: market capitalism (from about 1700-1850), monopoly/imperial capitalism (from about 1850-1940), and the current stage of post-WWII late capitalism (also called post-industrial capitalism). The defining feature of late capitalism, for both Mandel and Jameson, is the commodification of elements of the superstructure (such as art, sport, or education) that were largely divorced from the economic realm during earlier waves of capitalism.



Acknowledging the reciprocal and dialectical nature of culture and economic system, Jameson (1991) argues that postmodernism represents a merging of culture and economics onto a single plane, to the point in which culture itself becomes a ubiquitous commodity. Culture, in late capitalism, is regarded not only as a process within which consumer goods can be manipulated for the stimulation of consumption, but as a product that itself can be materially or experientially commodified (Mandel, 1999). The realm of culture becomes a source of capital accumulation, rather than intentionally kept distinct from perceived economic debasement. As Andrews (2006) writes of late capitalism, “whether in the guise of films, television, music, literary, or informational products, mass-mediated ‘cultural forms’ have thus become a ‘central focus and expression of economic activity’” (Connor, 1989; quoted in Andrews, 2006: p. 90).

Jameson refers to late capitalism as the ‘purest’ form of capitalism because it “eliminates the enclaves of precapitalist organization it had hitherto tolerated and exploited in a tributary way” (p. 36) and instead commodifies directly. The symptoms of late capitalism include: decentered global networks of capital, industrial flexibility, a reorganization of capital-state production models<sup>7</sup>, neoliberalism, the rise of service industries such as marketing and advertising, and the centrality of mass consumption. Mandel and Jameson both attributed modernism to earlier forms of capitalism. Mandel, however, attributes high modernism to late capitalism, whereas Jameson attributes postmodernism. As art, culture, and capitalism evolved, elements first captured in postmodern art, for Jameson, became an indicator of the predominant “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1961) among broader culture.

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<sup>7</sup> Such as Fordism and post-Fordism, which are discussed later in this chapter.

Although the “post” prefix of postmodernism implies a delineated periodization, or an opposition to modernism, Jameson (1991) points out that is not the case. Postmodernism exists perpetually alongside modernism and other cultural conditions, just as some elements of postmodernism have existed in what is referred to as modern and pre-modern societies. For example, the postmodern emphasis is disunity, irrationality, and subjectivity does not insinuate that modern society was always unified, rational, and objective. The shift from modernism to postmodernism should not imply a total shift in collective societal thought and behavior, rather it suggests a shifting of perspective onto the things that modernity has tended to ignore. Postmodernism then should not be seen as *replacing* modernism, but *coexisting* with it (Slater, 1997). Rather than asserting that postmodernism now exists in omnipotence and totality, Jameson argues that postmodernism is the current “cultural dominant” that allows for the “presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, features” (p. 4). Nonetheless, he suggests that the economic groundwork of postmodernism (and the corresponding burgeoning of late capitalism) began in the 1950s, strengthened economically and socially in the 1960s, and crystallized and became readily apparent in the 1970s.

Featherstone (2007), however, cautions against a discussion of postmodernism that frames it as a mere detached scholarly debate in exclusive artistic, sociological, and philosophical circles. Instead he urges for a more grounded approach to postmodernism; one that seeks to understand how everyday people understand, experience, and engage with the elements of postmodern cultures that intellectuals have theorized about. Featherstone’s main critique of Jameson’s (1991) analysis of postmodernism is that he jumps from the economic to the cultural while ignoring the social. Featherstone adds that

“to understand postmodern culture, we need not to just read the signs but look at how the signs are used by figurations of people in their day-to-day practices” (p. 62). While showing appreciation for Jameson’s critical examinations of high art, literature, film, and architecture in the context of postmodernism, Featherstone advocates for a greater emphasis on the everyday practices of individuals or groups that answers the “who? when? where? how? how many?” questions that not only would grant more empirical legitimacy to postmodernism for its critics (many of whom view it as an unscientific, anti-empirical, ‘anything goes’ fad) but provides a more holistic, non-hierarchized (and more postmodern) understanding for its proponents. Without falling prey to what Stuart Hall laments as an essential and uncritical celebration of the disorienting nature of postmodernism (Grossberg, 1986), this project intends to answer Featherstone’s call by critically interrogating postmodern themes in the everyday material object of the custom sneaker.

In a grounded approach that begins with and emphasizes the everyday actions of individuals, this thesis will analyze four elements of postmodernism and late capitalism described by postmodern scholars such as Jameson (1991), Baudrillard (1983), Featherstone (2007), and others. The four symptoms are: 1) the aestheticization of everyday life; 2) the democratization of culture; 3) depthlessness and the decline of original cultural production; and 4) the dominance of the sign. These four elements, which I will describe below, are not an exhaustive list of the elements of postmodernism, but are most relevant for the scope of this project. For this reason, they will be used as frameworks for culturally-contextualizing the sneaker customization and symbolic creativity in modern-day consumer culture.

### *2.1.1 Aestheticization of Everyday Life*

The aestheticization of everyday life refers to the postmodern tendency of applying style, or flare, to entities that have traditionally lacked it. This is partially a result of the boundaries between art and everyday life beginning to erode in postmodernity. Life itself becomes a work of art, with the individual as the artist harboring autonomy to shape and express their identity through stylization (Featherstone, 2007). The aestheticization is often playful and eclectic, mixing and experimenting with various codes of style. Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) conceptual group of late-capitalist "cultural intermediaries" both embodies and reproduces this aestheticization. Bourdieu describes these new bourgeoisie individuals as those who provide and popularize various symbolic goods and services that drive late capitalism, such as marketers, advertisers, media, fashion models, and in our case, sneaker designers and customizers. They merge the "high" cultural symbolism of modernism traditionally reserved for elite classes with "low" popular culture; a collapse representative of postmodernism's collapse of high/low hierarchies. They are focused on identity, chase experience, emphasize image and appearances, and reject traditional codes (Featherstone, 2007). Culture is their main commodity, and they use it as a means of distinction through style and expression while also promoting and transmitting it across modernist cultural boundaries.

Consumption plays a central role in this aestheticization of life. The purchasing, possession, and display of material objects is expressive, and allows the postmodern artist/individual to communicate their carefully-crafted lifestyle. This is not to say that this stylization is calculated or rational; it is often an affective and hedonistic pursuit

driven by desire, sensation, spontaneity, and indulgence (Lash, 1988). Yet, the capability for this stylization to be communicative depends on a late-capitalist society in which commodities are meaningful more for what Baudrillard (1983) calls their sign-value than their use value. What these stylized commodities signify is what provides their value to the postmodern individual, and can only be decoded in the context of an entire culture based upon image and simulation (Baudrillard, 1983<sup>8</sup>). While there has been research on the various significations of sneakers, there has been little research into the specific ways in which sneakers (especially custom sneakers) have been utilized as signs of expressive identity in the aestheticization of everyday life, as well as the motivations, calculations, and/or affective elements of sneaker consumption that accompany it.

### *2.1.2 Democratization of Culture*

A second, and certainly related, condition of postmodernism is the democratization of culture, which broadly refers to the heightening accessibility of cultural forms – that have previously been deemed exclusive to elite groups – to those of common culture (Featherstone, 2007). Modernist culture has differentiated cultural forms (such as art, sport, and fashion) as ‘high’ and therefore off-limits to the masses, which, for Willis (1990), was the impetus for the symbolic creativity of the popular masses. In postmodernity, this hierarchy has collapsed, thereby making cultural forms more available to the popular masses, or the ‘common’ people. For example, certain artistic forms have traditionally required a certain amount of ‘capital’, whether economic or cultural (Bourdieu, 1987), to appreciate and understand. However, postmodernism has

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<sup>8</sup> This argument is further explicated later in the chapter when discussing the “dominance of the sign.”

initiated the erosion of these traditional boundaries by the mass diffusion of these art forms to segments of the population that lacked a sufficient amount of capital necessary to produce, consume, or merely appreciate. This diffusion is, in part, due to late capitalism's expanded global network, changing models of production, and the work of the cultural intermediaries to mediate the process.

The democratization of culture has been viewed pessimistically by some scholars, including Jameson (1987), who argues that the intellectual class should resist the populist spirit of postmodernism and retain authority to think and speak about culture as a defined entity. However, the power to define culture has traditionally only been possessed by dominant groups. The erosion of the monopoly of dominant groups to define what is art, fashion, and lifestyle, and which forms of them are legitimate, grants more power to the everyday person to collaborate in those definitions. For example, in terms of consumption, the democratization of fashion exposed the masses to high forms of fashion and allowed them to emulate, or in some cases subvert, the styles of those higher on the traditional hierarchy (Featherstone, 2007). This exposure, and the resulting tendencies of the masses to balance emulation and individuality through their consumption choices, are the driving force of fashion, according to Simmel (1978). Yet, as Miles (1998; drawing from Barnard, 1996) argues, "fashion can act as a resource by which social groups can maintain either dominant or subservient positions within a social order" (p. 98). The ability to wield fashion of their own creation, then, provides the potential for those of low culture to gain more power and visibility in various social institutions.

In addition to a greater capability for appreciation and consumption of these democratized cultural forms, the postmodern individual is also able to produce styles of

their own creation, either in reference to or conjunction with these popular styles. In the sneaker industry, this has led to a transition away from ‘high culture’ industry designers in control of sneaker styles and has given more agency to the cultural intermediaries (such as athletes, musicians, or entertainers) associated with shoes through endorsements or corporate partnerships, and the everyday ‘low culture’ consumers (including sneaker customizers). However, there has been little critical examination into the specific implications of the flattening of this cultural hierarchy for consumer culture in general, and sneaker customization, style, and identity in particular.

### *2.1.3 Depthlessness, and the Decline of Original Cultural Production*

The third relevant condition of postmodernism is the decline of original cultural production, referring to the tendency of contemporary cultural forms to lack the perceived depth and authenticity of modern cultural forms and instead being almost solely referential to previous or contextual cultural forms in an inauthentic and/or unevocative manner. Jameson (1991) painted this as one of the primary symptoms of postmodernism. He argued that postmodern culture is plagued by ‘depthlessness’, or a ‘waning of affect’ (p. 9-10) in which cultural forms are superficial, stripped of objective meaning, and lack a provocation of an emotional response. In replacement of depth, for Jameson, is “a conception of practices, discourses, and textual play...depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces” (p. 12). Jameson used the term ‘pastiche’ to denote the logics of postmodern cultural forms, referring to a weakening of historicity which he described as “like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style...but is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody’s ulterior motives, amputated

of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction” (p. 17). Jameson proceeds to argue that pastiche is omnipresent, incorporating random collections of styles and references from the past for the sole purpose of dispirited reanimation, contributing to a society dominated by images, spectacles, and copies for which no original has ever existed (Buchanan, 2006; Debord, 1994).

Pastiche leads to what Jameson calls ‘nostalgia for the present’ (p. 279), referring to the nostalgia for lost ‘presentness’ of the past (Buchanan, 2006: p. 95) that is evoked by reanimated styles and symbols from a glossy, romanticized past depicted only through interpretation by the cultural milieu of the present. An example that Jameson invoked is the (post)modern film industry that endlessly produces sequels, trilogies, reboots, remakes, and features plots that occur in glamorized stylistic representations of historical periods that exist only in contemporary discourse. This argument may seem extreme and overly-pessimistic. Nonetheless, it is one worth considering at least pre-emptively, especially with a contemporary athletic footwear industry that is heavily driven by releases “retro” styles of previous era (such as Chuck Taylor’s, Jordan’s, and other ‘classic’ sneakers), popularized by cultural figures only relevant due to nostalgia and romanticism. Willis’ symbolic creativity, in part, can be understood as a reinvocation of originality through sneaker customization. Still, it is worth considering how “original” consumers are when customizing shoes. While some may be inspired by new forms of design and creation to express identity, the customizations of others may reflect a depthless pastiche of earlier cultural forms upheld through romantic discourse and commercially-manipulated nostalgia.



#### *2.1.4 Dominance of the Sign*

The dominance of the sign is fourth relevant condition of postmodernism, and it builds from the third. Jean Baudrillard's semiological work is most useful here, which provides a key extension of Karl Marx's (1977) theory of commodity fetishism. Marx discusses how in capitalism, laborers produce goods for market exchange, which he calls commodities. Through the market, the value of commodities changes from representing the labor that produced them (called labor-value) to becoming separate from that labor and perceived as an object with its own intrinsic value in relation to other objects (called exchange-value). In the process, the market exchange alienates the laborer from his/her good, distorts the social nature of that good, and transforms subjective, social human relationships into objective, economic relationships. Since we perceive the value of commodities to transcend their root in human labor, commodities begin to become fetishized, or endowed with intrinsic value, meaning, or properties deriving from the combination of material features and enigmatic social relations behind the commodity's production (Lury, 2011). Marx also argues that the fetishism and mystery of commodities ultimately masks the inequitable and exploitative conditions in which that commodity was produced, sustaining those conditions (Marx, 1977, cited in Lury, 2011).

Not only does exchange-value appear to be intrinsic to the commodity, but so can social and cultural values. In late capitalism, the function of marketing and advertising is to bestow esoteric social and cultural values, or what Richards (1991) calls 'forms of representation', onto commodities. The intention for commercial interests is to convince the consumer that not only does a commodity possess certain desirable qualities, but that those qualities will transfer to the consumer through obtaining it (Leiss, et al, 1986, cited

in Lury, 2011). The reason this is possible, according to Adorno (1974), is because the exchange-value of commodities has become so engrained in public perception that the original use-value has been forgotten, allowing the commodity to take up a second use-value. Haug (1986) argues that use-value is still meaningful to consumers, but that what is being sold is the *promised* use-value of a commodity. This promise is communicated through what Haug calls “commodity aesthetics”, referring to the elements that construct a commodity’s appearance, such as branding, design, packaging, display, in addition to advertising that contributes to its promise of satisfaction. The goal of advertising and marketing, then, is to provide a new meaning to a commodity whose meaning has mostly been lost, usually by distorting the commodity aesthetics to construct its second use-value to be something socioculturally desirable (Jhally, 1989). In the process, not only does advertising and marketing give artificial meaning to a commodity, but it constitutes what Ewen and Ewen (1976) call the “mass individual” who represents the collective consciousness of consumer culture that is shaped by the circulation of signs and images.

Jean Baudrillard provided a postmodern extension of this argument. He drew from Saussure’s (2013) theory of semiotics, which argues that meaning is communicated through what he calls ‘signs’, that include words, images, sounds, etc. Each sign consists of a signifier (the form a sign takes) and a signified (the concept or meanings that it represents). As a structuralist, Saussure believed that while the meanings of signs are arbitrary, they are derived from a fixed, consistent structure, or code, that could be objectively analyzed and scientifically discovered. Poststructuralists, including Baudrillard to an extent, critiqued this view, arguing that the meaning of signs is not

based on a coherent, universal structure and cannot be solidified, and are instead subjective, fluid, indeterminant, and boundless (Slater, 1997).

This argument has vast implications for consumer culture, in which goods and services<sup>9</sup> can be thought of as signs used to communicate social or cultural meanings in addition to (or in replacement of) economic ones. Signs do not exist in isolation however; they are subject to ideological manipulation. As Volosinov (1973) states, “the domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs...whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too” (cited in Hebdige, 1979; p. 13). Power can, and does, structure meaning, and this includes the power of producers of commodities to imbue their products with meanings favorable to the interests of dominant groups. Barthes (1977) still believed in the significance of use-value, arguing that an object’s function is not only still sought after, but also conveys meaning in itself and therefore can be included in an object’s sign analysis (creating the conjunctive term of sign-function). Baudrillard disagrees with Barthes, and to an extent Marx, stating that the function of a commodity is just a mythological ‘alibi’ that gives the appearance of being the reason of its value, but the value is actually derived from its purpose of symbol of social or cultural status (Slater, 1997).

Baudrillard (1998) argued that society no longer consumes commodities; rather, it consumes signs. Baudrillard suggests that in postmodern society, the value of a commodity is no longer derived from its material functionality, but from what that commodity signifies (what he calls the sign-value). However, the signified is not linked to the signifier through a universal structure. Instead, signs only make sense in their

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<sup>9</sup> I will continue to refer to goods and services as commodities.

contextual positions in a system of self-referential codes and signifiers that is produced by a constant flow of images, commodity aesthetics, manipulation by advertisers and marketers, and technological advancement. (Baudrillard, 1981). In postmodern society, the links between signifier and signified have broken down to the point where signifiers are “floating” and can be given any meaning in any context. The ubiquity of these free-floating cultural signs begins to constitute the social world, creating a ‘hyperreality’ in which the difference between reality and appearance of reality (or simulation) begins to blur (Baudrillard, 1994). Baudrillard refers to this as “signifying culture” and argues that it is the driving force of postmodern society, to the extent that traditional patterns of social relations become replaced with shifting, arbitrary, “hyperreal” signs (1983). Baudrillard, in similar fashion as Jameson’s concept of depthlessness and “pastiche” (1991), argues that the signs that constitute postmodern society become produced, then reproduced, then overproduced and oversaturated to the point that individuals can no longer attach any meaning to these signs and simulacrum, losing their ability to make sense of reality. For Baudrillard (1983), this results in the “end of the social”.

The breakdown of the boundaries between art and reality and the democratization of cultural forms is viewed pessimistically by Baudrillard, who views it as indicative of a loss of authentic meaning, declaring that “we live everywhere already in an ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality” (p. 148). Subjects no longer create objects, but simulated objects create subjects (Andrews, 1998). Not only are objects simulated in postmodernity, but human relationships become simulated as well, such as when advertisers administer an artificial sense of intimacy to commodities when no authentic intimacy exists (Ritzer ‘Introduction’ in Baudrillard, 1998). The postmodern individual desperately searches for

authenticity among the depthlessness, but cannot reach reality beyond the hyperreality (Kroker, 1985). The sign now dominates postmodernity. While Baudrillard's account may be extreme, it is useful for analyzing consumer culture because it allows us to assess where the value of commodities lies: in their function and materiality or in their symbolic cultural sign-value. This then allows us to consider the motivations for the possession and stylization of contemporary commodities, such as sneakers, and meanings consumers encode, attach, construct, mimic, or recreate when given more power to customize sneakers.

In conclusion, I have described postmodernism as a cultural condition within a broader late capitalist economy. Then, I proposed four elements of postmodernism – the aestheticization of everyday life, the democratization of culture, the decline of original production, and the dominance of the sign – that provide a groundwork for understanding sneaker customization as a form of symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990). Furthermore, they are important contexts for tracing the development of consumer culture and the evolving meanings of commodities, which I will discuss next.

## 2.2 Consumer Culture in Postmodernity

This section broadly examines the vast realm of *consumerism*, while keeping an underlying focus on fashion, arguably the realm of society in which the “the wares of consumerism are most visibly expressed and fervently endorsed” (Miles, 1998: p. 90). I will only indirectly analyze *consumption*, referring broadly to the process by which individuals purchase goods, services, or resources from producers on the market. While a

quantitative analysis of practices and trends in consumption has its use, it will not be my direction here. Instead my analysis will be of consumer culture, through which I will discuss: 1) the drives, motivations, and behaviors of individual consumers; 2) the values, significance, and meanings consumers attach to the practice of consumption; and 3) how consumer culture is dialectically influenced by broader structures, institutions, and sociocultural relations (Lury, 2011). This is not to say that the practice of consumption is not cultural. Even the most mundane and private acts of consumption implicitly serve to construct identity and stamp an imprint on the social world. As Slater (1997) states, “in consuming we do not - *ever* - simply reproduce our physical existence but also reproduce (sustain, evolve, defend, contest, imagine, reject) culturally specific, meaningful ways of life” (p. 4). In attaching the word ‘culture’ to consumption, however, I am implying two things: 1) that consumption is not just the unproblematic act of purchasing commodities to fill a need, but a way of life that is central to existing in a capitalist society, and 2) that consumption is not merely an outgrowth of the culture that it operates within, but it is a culture in and of itself harbors its own logics, norms, values and philosophies (Goodman & Cohen, 2004). By including and analysis of the sociological term of consumerism in addition to economic term of consumption, one can further “come to terms with the complexities that lie *behind* the act of consumption” (Miles, 1998: p. 2; italics in original).

Consumption within capitalism has been always integral to economic growth on a macro level and to the fulfillment of needs for individuals on a micro level. The concept of needs, however, is relative, fluid, and highly subjective, with a wide range of definitions. Needs can refer to commodities or objects (both material and non-material)

that are biological and vital to survival (Marcuse, 1969), commodities people believe they need to maintain a certain lifestyle, commodities people believe they are entitled to, commodities required for cultural participation (Doyal & Gough, 1991) or commodities people merely want or desire (Slater, 1997). Regardless of the precise definition, the concept of needs lays the foundation for perhaps the core issue of consumer culture and one that serves as a framework for this thesis: that is, the classic structure/agency debate between whether consumer culture is *shaped by* the needs and behavior of individual consumers, or if consumer culture *actively shapes* the needs and behaviors of individual consumers. To this point, Miles (1998) states that “not only does consumerism structure our everyday lives, but it does so by offering us the illusion of consumer freedom when, at least to a certain extent, such freedoms are inevitably constructed and constrained” (p. 5). Additionally, we must ask how this structuring or enactment of agency influences consumer practices, emotions, and identities. This section will address these questions by offering various theoretical arguments – specifically regarding linking consumerism to postmodernism, the meaning of commodities, the intersection of identity and consumerism, and the role of branding in consumer culture – in order to ultimately set a foundation for an analysis of the contemporary consumer culture in which sneaker customization emerged as a practice.

### *2.2.1 Linking Consumer Culture to Postmodernism*

Before understanding the relationship between postmodernism, late capitalism and consumer culture, it is important to understanding the roots of consumer culture in modernity and industrial capitalism. In traditional societies, luxurious consumption

(acquiring commodities in excess to one's basic needs) was seen as corrupt, sinful, morally wrong, and detrimental to societal order because it threatened to upend ascribed social status. Culture was understood as antithetical to the economic, a realm that transcended what was perceived to be shallow commercialism (Slater, 1997). Essentially, the rise of luxurious consumption was feared because it turned sociocultural status into something that can be bought (Sekora, 1977). The ingredients for consumer culture began to develop during the Enlightenment. As early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, goods and services began to multiply and become more accessible to people of varying socioeconomic statuses, while fashion and taste began to form as key elements of consumption (Slater, 1997). During this time, society still viewed consumption as meaningless waste and a squandering of resources without tangible benefit (Williams, 1976). As market capitalism emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, this view shifted to an understanding of consumption as the sole purpose of production (not yet on a mass-scale) and crucial to the sustainment of the economy and civil society. Consumption soon came to work in conjunction with the rationality and individualism of early modernity in the sense that an individual was free to represent themselves in the public sphere through the private purchasing of commodities through the market (Slater, 1997). It is around this time that critiques of consumer culture as materialistic begin to burgeon, as well as debates over the extent to which personal style and appearance through commodities conveys an authentic or performed self (Berman, 1970).

The increase in mass production of commodities during the Industrial Revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century spurred a subsequent mass consumption. It was around this time that consumer culture began to attract intellectual interest, with Marx's (1977) critiques of



industrial capitalism, political economy, and commodity fetishism at the forefront. Yet even in this era, consumerism was influenced by and was an influencer of culture. Slater (1995) describes how the modern society of that time exemplified a spectacularized consumable experience. Cities, stores, exhibitions, museums, and new forms of entertainment all contributed to a spectacle in which the consumer was an active audience member. Consumerism was simultaneously a classed phenomenon with entrenched cultural hierarchies. Bourgeoisie consumption often signified luxury and decadence, while working class consumption was viewed as tainted and uncivil. With the changing working hours of industrial production, the consumption of leisure, in addition to goods, became source of moral debate around the politics of respectability (Slater, 1997). Much of working-class male leisure time was being spent on activities that some viewed as immoral, such as drinking, gambling, and early forms of sport. Consumption was used as a vehicle for the upper class to civilize the working class; by demonstrating which material and leisure commodities were civil, the upper-class could attempt to divert the interests of the working-class to moral commodities (which also happened to be ones that intersected with bourgeoisie capital) and away from immoral ones (Cross, 1993). As Slater (1997) states, consumer culture at the onset of industrial capitalism “appears to emerge from a series of struggles to organize and tame, yet at the same time exploit commercially, the social spaces and times in which modernity is acted out” (p. 15).

Prompted largely by a crisis of overproduction and under-consumption following the Industrial Revolution, consumption was identified as vital for the sustainment of capitalism. An economy that emphasized individual consumption began to emerge at the turn of the century, culminating in what is referred to as the “first consumerist decade” of

the 1920s (Slater, 1997: p. 13). Mass production increasingly turned to presenting consumer goods as appealing to individuals' desire for luxury, style, and social status. The emergence of Fordist production models, Taylorism, and scientific management increased the efficiency in which consumer goods could be produced. The introduction of the advertising and marketing industries cultivated demand for these products. Marchand (1985) argues that it was in this era that everyday consumption became linked to the idea of modernity, with advertising and marketing not only selling specific goods, but portraying consumption *in general* as a way to achieve the American Dream and contribute to modern ideal of progress. This notion extended into the changing economy of post-WWII United States where consumption was seen as necessary for 'keeping up with the Joneses', or maintaining acceptable social status as a consumer citizen (Slater, 1997).

While conformity to middle-class lifestyles and the perception of affluence was a primary motivator of consumer attitudes and behavior in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, social groups also began to define themselves and their identities through their consumption patterns (Slater, 1997). The decades that followed, coinciding with the emergence of late capitalism, post-Fordism, and lifestyle marketing saw elements of postmodernism begin to accompany the modern elements. The neoliberal economic and social policies of the late-1970s and 1980s held consumer choice as a crucial indicator of a healthy economy, a tool for which radically individualistic consumers to engage with in the formation of self and pursuit of success. Yet, traditional production and consumption patterns began to be upended by the increasing dominance of advertising and marketing, resulting in the

triumph of the sign, rather than function, as the center of consumer desire (Baudrillard, 1983).

Just as postmodernism does not exist in lieu of modernism, contemporary postmodern consumer culture extends, incorporates, or transforms the elements of modern consumer culture discussed previously. It is important to establish that consumer culture is not just a subset of a more general culture; rather, I argue that contemporary culture *is* a consumer culture. Values, norms, and social relations of contemporary culture do not merely frame our consumption practices, but in a sense, derive from our consumption practices. For example, postmodern culture is materialistic, hedonistic, emphasizes ‘having’ over ‘being’, contains an uneasy and often contradictory relationship between individuality and conformity, and is enamored with ‘style’ that intersects with identity and culture (Jameson, 1991; Miller, 1987; Slater, 1997).

The ways in which these values are shaped on a grand scale is by individuals possessing and/or adorning commodities that they believe signify culture, identity, or morality. Yet, as Baudrillard (1983) and other poststructuralists reminds us, what these commodities signify is unsteady, everchanging, difficult to define, and subject to manipulation by exploitative late capitalist forces who are concerned with profit and economic gain rather than cultural or moral authenticity (Slater, 1997). Culture, in this sense, is often only used by commercial interests as an avenue for economic gain. Individual consumers are often convinced that the cultural commodities they produce and the relationship between themselves and the producers are authentic, but often the consumers are just anonymous objects for potential profit, such as the target of a

Carefully-coordinated marketing pitch or a profile constructed through an analytic algorithm (Slater, 1997). While the modern freedom of choice to consume and capability to construct one's self through consumption is still a dominant feature of postmodern popular discourse, the relationship is exploitative and muddled by the proliferation of signs, inauthentic culture, and manufactured consumer-object relationships. It is in that context that Willis' (1990) symbolic creativity is significant, as it re-inscribes subjective agency into the commercially-objectified consumer.

For those that subscribe to the view that consumption exists merely to fill needs, postmodern consumer culture does not warrant optimism. As discussed earlier, the definition of a need is ambiguous. Marcuse (1969) argues that capitalism depends on the perpetual expansion of the realm of necessity, and therefore creates and defines its own artificial needs, often framed as artificial solutions to artificial problems. Postmodern consumer culture not only discreetly accepts that needs are insatiable; it *relies* on it. As Slater (1997) states, "commodity production requires the sale of ever-increasing quantities of ever-changing good; market society is therefore perpetually haunted by the possibility that needs might be either satisfied or unsatisfied" (p. 29). Campbell (1994) argues that objects of consumption can never satisfy needs or wants because it is the stimuli that those objects produce, rather than the object itself, that is the source of consumer desire. Campbell argues that consumers experience "daydreaming", or a state of illusory hedonism and pleasure that exists only in the imagination, and subsequently pursue objects that they associate with this imaginary pleasure in order to fulfill it. However, Campbell concludes that since reality can never compare to the imaginary and that these consumer pleasures are not grounded in reality, objects can never satisfy the

needs in the way that consumers hope that they will. As a result, consumers experience a constant state of disillusionment with objects they own, while harboring a perpetual desire to acquire new ones. The commodities are used as a means to obtain pleasure in its imagined, externally manufactured, and often unrealistic state.

### *2.2.2 Theorizing the Meaning of Commodities*

In analyzing consumer goods from a material culture perspective, the approach of Douglas and Isherwood (1979) studied goods by either their function or their meaning. While function is relatively stable, the meanings of goods are more fluid, unstable, and contingent upon and mutually-constitutive of culture. Operating under the anthropological assumption that all goods carry cultural meaning, they suggest that goods can then be understood as communicators of meaning and ‘markers’ of social relations, classifications, or identity. The exchange and flow of goods, then, continuously reproduce social order and are crucial to the maintenance of it. Douglas and Isherwood argue that goods are not just messages in a broader information system, but they constitute the system itself. In contrast to Baudrillard’s view of commodity signification as being constructed externally, Douglas and Isherwood view the meanings of goods to be derived internally to cultures, from the people who construct their own meanings relatively autonomously. Therefore, material goods serve as more than just functional objects or communicators of meaning; they are used by individuals to make sense of their existence.

Despite his hyper-determinist view of consumption, I tend to side with Baudrillard in this debate, especially when it comes to sneakers. Douglas and

Isherwood's implication that meaning has a material connection to practices and behaviors of a culture draws a link that is somewhat too simple. It ignores the intentional manipulation of the meanings of goods and their connections to cultural existence. Whereas in traditional and modern societies cultural institutions (such as religion, tradition, politics) assisted in mediating the link between meaning and existence, the breakdown of the influence of these institutions has left this link unfulfilled. Advertising and marketing then attempt to fill this gap, but in a way that is profitable for the commercial interests in late capitalism. This includes attempting to imbue objects with associations with attitudes, expectations, and identities to appeal to certain lifestyles, taste cultures, or market segments (Leiss et al., 1986; Slater, 1997). Instead of cultural meaning deriving organically from the flow of goods and information, commodities in postmodernism are increasingly being manipulated to portray cultural meanings that are commodified and inauthentic. The sneaker industry, as I will argue later, has used marketing and advertising heavily to manipulate the signs and meanings of their products. One must consider whether the symbolically creative meanings of customized sneakers are constructed by individuals as autonomously as Douglas and Isherwood suggest, or if the meanings more influenced by ideological codes espoused from sneaker industry marketing and advertising.

The idea of consumer goods being used as a means of social differentiation has long permeated consumer culture literature. Thorstein Veblen (1926) theorized that the "leisure class" used consumer goods and leisure practices as a way to demonstrate their social status. The defining feature of many of these goods and practices, for Veblen, was their intentional separation from productiveness and usefulness. Therefore, the

consumption of these goods was conspicuous and unnecessary. In a modern society in which individuals of common culture valued productivity in time and goods, the elite class separated itself by consuming goods and leisure practices that were intentionally unnecessary. The value of these goods was their very lack of necessity, which signaled distinction from a common culture that desired to emulate this type of conspicuous consumption, but ultimately could not afford to do so.

Douglas and Isherwood (1979) drew upon Veblen's understanding of what consumer goods symbolize. They viewed the meaning of goods as being derived from their ability to act as markers of social status. Goods then, because of their meanings, act as tools for social competition: symbolically used by individuals for social mobility, social membership, and social exclusion. Since consumer goods are so inextricably linked to class, lifestyle, and social status, emulation of the consumption habits of certain status groups emerges as a way for those excluded to finally see themselves as included. However, as Hirsch (1977) argues, consumption is a 'zero-sum game' because status meanings of consumer goods are positional and relative. Since the value of elite consumer goods is often derived from their inaccessibility to non-elite classes, popular emulation of those goods can rarely be a means of achieving the status one is seeking. As soon as consumer goods or lifestyles become emulated, the meanings of them change, as well as the position on the social ladder that those goods supposedly correspond with. Often, what results is another good then taking up that exclusionary meaning, becoming the next thing emulated. As Slater (1997) states, "no consumption can be final" (p. 156).

Theories regarding consumption as purely emulative are mostly flawed, especially in the era of postmodernity, due to: 1) the assumption that cultural status and lifestyles

trickle from the top-down, 2) they reduce consumptive motivation almost exclusively to structural competition and 3) they ignore the social and culturally-constructed nature of taste, or Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, as a motivator for the pursuit of certain lifestyles. Still, they are useful in analyzing how consumer commodities are used and perceived by status groups and can provide insight into at least some aspects of consumer motivation: such as the extent to which sneakers are employed as a material of social competition, differentiation, or emulation; as well as how that employment may affect the ways in which they are customized.

Willis' argument fits into the literature at this point, as he takes an approach that also focuses more on consumer agency. To reiterate, Willis (1990) argues that consumption is creative and open-ended, and that each consumer negotiates the meanings of commodities for themselves instead of merely consuming a commodity whose meaning has already been determined for them. Although advertising, marketing, and word-of-mouth imbues a commodity with some meaning, the consumer still engages in the symbolic work of negotiating the meaning for themselves. Echoing the aestheticization of everyday life, Willis refers to goods as raw materials for consumers to creatively display and utilize. His analysis is optimistic because contemporary consumer culture allows consumers more power to create (or contest) meaning than earlier forms of consumer culture have. Sassatelli (2007) draws on Willis by suggesting that consumers increasingly use commodities as a way to just be different. In a postmodern culture fraught with depthless objectivity, consumers not only pursue commodities that may be different, but use commodities to perform difference and portray themselves as non-conformist. Mass customization provides an opportunity for consumers searching for



subjectivity in depthless objects, to an extent. As Sassatelli argues, these consumers still rely on the producers of the commodities of difference and still engage in the actual act of consumption in almost the same manner as the consumer that pursues emulation.

However, customization certainly mandates more consumer agency not only in the process of production but in the negotiation of meaning that consumers ascribe to their sneaker.

Shifting back to a more structural view, Lee (1993) suggests that the changes to the structure of labor and production in the post-Fordist era<sup>10</sup> are reflected in the material commodities themselves. One example of this is the increase of aesthetic obsolescence, or the rapid turnover of style and design trends that Lee attributes to efforts to appeal to various market segments that are constantly evolving. Lee also argues that post-Fordist commodity-forms have transitioned from material to experiential. By this, Lee (1993) means that producers are decreasingly focusing on the physical, material elements of commodities and focusing more on promoting the experience of consuming and using of those commodities. Perhaps it is not the finished product of the customized sneaker, but the experience of designing it that is most desirable to consumers.

In somewhat of a rejection of the structure/agency debate is the ‘theory of practice’ approach to consumption (Lury, 2011; Warde, 2005). This notion rejects a meta-narrative of consumption as either individualist or conformist and instead attempts to situate it incrementally throughout the fabrics of social life. This theory does not view consumption as a dramatic decision by the consumer, but attempts to view it within the context of mundane, unexciting, routine everyday practices. Consumption may be a

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<sup>10</sup> Such as technological innovation in production and distribution, new methods of stock and inventory, and an increased focus on design and aesthetics, as will be described later in the chapter.

common practice, but not one that is all that significant in the context of everyday life. As Lury (2011) describes, “from this point of view, consumption is not, by itself, a practice, but is, rather, a moment in almost every practice...it is the organization of practices” (p. 211). Yet in the era of vast consumer choice between commodities, this theory seems insufficient in theorizing the ways in which consumers decide between which commodities to consume, if any at all. Still, we must at least consider the possibility that, especially within postmodernity, consumers reasoning for customizing sneakers may be messy, incoherent, inconsequential, spontaneous, and incapable of being explained by any of the previous frameworks. Willis’ theory of symbolic creativity also suggested that creative acts may be done subconsciously and viewed as mundane by the creators. However, for our purposes of a cultural analysis, these acts are still significant as they reveal meaning, logics, and motivations behind them. Regardless of the extent to which the individual considers their creative acts meaningful, they do not exist in a vacuum and are worthy sites of analysis.

Assuming that there is, however, at least some level of ideological structure that determines the meanings of sneaker customization, it is still insufficient to assess the postmodern consumer’s motivations, desires, and behaviors as if they were purely derived from ideological rationalism (Grossberg 1992; cited in Andrews, 1998). One must consider the affective elements of objects and the meanings they signify, specifically examining how the affective realm provokes emotional responses to various mediated ideological narratives (Andrews, 1998). Brennan (2004) refers to affect as emotions, passions, attitudes, moods, or desires that provoke physiological responses that, in our case, are stimulated and transmitted through consumer goods. Andrews

(1998) explains that postmodernism “has recognized that cultural practices are implicated in, and constructed out of, their ideological, economic, libidinal, aesthetic, material, and *emotional* effects” (p. 6, italics added). Affect must at least be in dialogue with ideology, especially when considering the commercial attempts to provoke affective responses through their consumers goods via marketing and advertising. Grossberg (1992) argues that affect is an important mechanism through which identity is conceptualized, adding that “it is affect which enables some differences (e.g. race, gender, etc.) to matter as markers of identity rather than others (e.g. foot length, angle of ears, eye color) in certain contexts” (p. 105). For this reason, when analyzing the meanings of sneakers to individuals, it is important to not get caught up in the metaphysical, ideological realm but to “bridge the gap between ideology and everyday existence” (Andrews, 1998; p. 6) by considering the affective and emotional factors in possessing and customizing sneakers in a certain way.

### *2.2.3 Theorizing Identity in Consumer Culture*

Moran’s (2015) defines the notion of identity as “the unique characteristics, traits, dispositions possessed or exhibited by a person...which makes the person unique, special, or different from others” (p. 42). I will proceed with this project broadly using this definition, although it is overly-simplistic and imperfect. Discourse often positions identity as essential to individuals. However, Moran argues that to even debate whether the notion of identity is either essential or socially-constructed is problematic because it presupposes that it even exists prior to its sociocultural constitution, and that, unlike race or gender, individuals ascribed to certain identity category share some sort of essential

characteristic that individuals outside the category do not. Instead, identity functions as an empty signifier which needs to be filled by some sort of other social characteristic. Still, proceeding with the aforementioned definition, Moran (2015) goes on to argue that identity is not constituted simply by the pre-emptive existence of the personal characteristics that make one unique, but also by the active recognition, marking, and identification of them. Consumerist practices, as broadly construed throughout this overview, is clearly one of the mechanisms through which identity is recognized, marked, performed, expressed, and thereby constituted. Identity, then, does not pre-exist, but emerges alongside, practices of consumerism.

The relationship between identity and commodities is often complex and paradoxical. Dittmar (1992) describes it as indicative of the idealism-materialism paradox of modern society: the way in which on one hand, identity is perceived as being unique, autonomous, and not heavily influenced by people, society, and culture; yet on the other hand, identity is so clearly defined and moderated by the exchange, possession, and use of commodities (Lury, 2011). Featherstone (2007) argues that postmodern individuals now understand this paradox. As a result, they engage in a self-aware and ironic form of consumption, in which they understand that one can have a relatively consistent identity regardless of their possessions, yet exchange and obtain possessions in a casual attempt to try on different identities or lifestyles in a postmodern society that seemingly discourages identity stability. Since identity in postmodernity is fragmented and perpetually in the process of becoming, consumption allows the individual to formulate the subjective self.

Many of the modern understandings of consumption have too rigid of a view of the attitudes, moods, and objectives of the individual consumer. These understandings

typically involve the rational and autonomous individual with a stable identity using consumption in a manner to rationally achieve a set objective, whether social, cultural, political, or economic. Slater (1997) used the term “post-traditional self” to describe the individual in modern and postmodern consumer society. Slater viewed post-traditional society as being marked by pluralization, in which there exists “a bewildering variety and fluidity of values, roles, authorities, symbolic resources and social encounters out of which an individual’s social identity must be produced and maintained” (p. 83). In this view, consumption is far from rational, and the individual is faced with the daunting task of using it in its myriad and contradictory forms as a means to construct identity, let alone express it. Identity may partially still be a choice, but not an easy one.

This predicament is wielded by late capitalist forces that attempt to tie cultural identity to commodities, essentially turning identity itself into a commodity to be exploited. The concept of lifestyle emerges from this exploitation, in which late capitalist industries (such as advertising and marketing) attempt to propagate novel and unique yet artificial sets of practices, style, behavior, or preferences in an attempt to preemptively define identities that they can then commodify and ultimately profit from (Slater, 1997). The pluralized, post-traditional individual then must consume commodities in order to search for and express identity. This identity can be expressed through the aestheticization of everyday life, and the democratization of culture allows cultural styles and designs to be accessible to more individuals. However, with the depthlessness and culture and proliferation of empty signs, a consistent identity is difficult to construct.

Race has played a prominent role in consumer culture, especially within the relationship between the advertising industry and racial representation. Advertising has long relied on race as a means to associate certain commodities with signifiers of cultural identity, both benevolently and maliciously. McClintock (1994) used the term “commodity racism” to describe how commodities have historically worked as agents of reproducing stereotypical racial and colonial discourses. She writes, “commodity racism...converted the imperial progress narrative into mass-produced consumer spectacles. Commodity racism...came to produce, market and distribute evolutionary racism and imperial power on a hitherto unimagined scale” (pg. 133). For example, McClintock points to two advertisements for Pears’ soap. One ad, from 1899, claims that Pears’ soap can lighten the White Man’s Burden through teaching the virtue of cleanliness to the “dark corners of the earth” (p. 132). Another ad, from 1910, depicts a white nurse scrubbing a young black boy with Pears’ soap until the boy’s skin miraculously turns from black to white. Racist ideologies were embedded into the commodity itself through its significations.

Commodities, along with the meanings that advertisements attempt to attach to them, not only rely on and reflect racial tropes, but play an active role in constituting racial representations through the white gaze (in the Pears’ example, the association of blackness with dirtiness and whiteness with purity and cleanliness). Susan Willis (1990) argues that commodity aesthetics have moved away from racial representations of race as a fixed biological category and have moved towards representing race as a matter of style. She argues that in order to retain market demand, commodities must balance novelty, variation, and repetition in relation to other competing or earlier products. Race, she argues, has been one of the frameworks through which stylistic variation of

commodities has been marketed, implicitly or explicitly. Willis suggests that representations of race through commodities in post-Fordism have emerged in two simultaneous but contradictory ways: through the pursuit of sameness and through the pursuit of difference. For example, Willis points out that black versions of predominantly white cultural goods have been produced to promote the idea of sameness between races, such as dolls being similar in every way except skin color. In terms of the pursuit of and emphasis on racial difference, Willis uses the example of Michael Jackson, a black male pop musician who continuously altered the expression of his racial identity through clothing, make-up, and surgery. As I will describe later this chapter, sneaker culture was closely associated with African-American hip-hop culture through discursive constructions emanating mainly from the advertising and marketing of the sneaker industry. One must consider how the version of blackness constructed by sneaker industries for profit affects popular racial representation, as well as the ways in which this representation affects who is customizing sneakers and how they are customizing them.

At the core of post-Fordist (and postmodern) consumer racial representation seems to be a shifting of the understanding of race from a fixed biological category to a socially-constructed category. Yet, it is a social construction that is expressed as a fun, benevolent category manifested in expressive identity and style that can be put on or taken off at any given moment, rather than an arbitrary category with material personal and institutional consequences. A prominent example of this racial dilution is Benetton, an Italian fashion brand that overtly engages with the politics of racial representation. Benetton's advertising campaigns feature series of juxtaposed arms or legs of various skin colors wearing Benetton products, as well as children and adults of different races

hugging, laughing, and holding hands while wearing Benetton clothing (Giroux, 1993). The clothing is less of the product than the skin color the consumer can *choose* to wear is. The question that Benetton seems to invite is, what skin color will you be today? (Fernando, 1992; Lury, 2011). Yet the racial representations are not authentic or harmless. Back & Quaade (1993) point out how in the Benetton campaigns, “human difference is reduced to a set of simplified caricatures which are presented as archetypes...a parade of racial essences” (p. 69). The implicit message of these images is that race is merely an aesthetic choice. Subsequently, this representation suggests that racial harmony can be achieved by stepping into the other races’ shoes (literally or figuratively) through consumption. Although the understanding of race has evolved in postmodernity, it is still understood through the white gaze and is exploited for commercial gain. This is seen heavily in the construction of blackness in the sneaker industry and many of the athletes used to promote it.

Consumer culture is not constituted solely through the white gaze, however. Black consumers engage in a cultural struggle over the meanings of commodities and the advertisements that accompany them. In applying race to Willis’ (1990) class-based theory of symbolic creativity, Gilroy (1983) argued that black people often refute dominant racial representations and work to create their own meanings through consumption practices. Gilroy explains that black racial identity is often formulated by a complex attachment to varieties, styles, brands, and objects: such as music consumption, cars, hairstyles, and Jordan-brand sneakers for example. Gilroy also argues that black consumers have subverted many of the traditionally-white consumer practices. For example, he explains that whereas white culture often understands night time as a period



for rest and recovery, black culture understands night time as a period for amusement and the pursuit of pleasure. Also, whereas white culture generally understands consumption as a private, individual, domestic act, black people consume in a more collective and expressive manner. Though race may be used by the sneaker industry in the interpellation (Althusser, 1971) of individuals into racial identities, Gilroy's approach opens the possibility that ideological representations of race could be resisted and negotiated through the act of sneaker customization, with these representations being the impetus for racialized symbolic creativity.

#### *2.2.4 Branding Commodities*

In their early forms, brands were created in order to allow producers to convey controlled messages about products to consumers through presentation, packaging, distribution, and media, while bypassing retailers and other intermediaries (Lury, 2011). As branding developed, companies incorporated logos, slogans, personalities, and ambassadors not only in an effort to reach certain target consumers but to act as a guarantor of quality and consistency in increasingly competitive markets (Lury, 2011). Branding played a crucial role in the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism, transcending the marketing department and permeating throughout organizations as a collective focus at all levels. Also during this shift was competition and pursuit of innovation in the “multidimensionality” (Cochoy, 1998) of products: such as the brands, services, packaging, and meanings of a product in addition to its materiality and function, all of which combined to make up the “essence” of a product. A product's essence was not solely passively constructed by consumers, but was actively constructed by producers as

well. The rise of “creative advertising” in the 1980s and 1990s moved beyond advocating for a product’s utility for the consumer, aiming to artificially create an entire lifestyle around the use and possession of a product. Included in a commodity’s aura was often an attempt to designate the aesthetics and affective associations that were intended to accompany that product (Nixon, 1996). Through mediating the terms of engagement of products, branding then can be understood not only as an avenue to sustained profit, but a tool for controlling the lived experiences of consumers of that product (Hearn, 2008).

A brand’s intended reputation does not always match its reception, however. Holt (2004) argues that brands emerge through consumers as well, with their meanings constructed through a history filled with customer experiences that is diffused through word-of-mouth<sup>11</sup> distribution, cultural intermediaries and personalities, culture industries, semiotic associations and media (Arvidsson, 2006; Lury, 2004). Holt (2004) also details the rise of what he calls ‘iconic’ brands; brands that are symbolic, culturally-contingent, and known more for what they represent than what they do, or even how well they do it. According to Holt, these brands are “imbued with stories that consumers find valuable in constructing their identities. Consumers flock to brands that embody the ideals they admire, brands that help them express who they want to be” (p. 4). Among these brands are Coke, Budweiser, Jack Daniel’s, and athletic apparel companies such as Nike and Adidas.

In the era of branding, producers intend to go beyond treating the sale to a customer as a one-time interaction. Instead, they intend to create a relationship with consumers that they hope will increase satisfaction with the product and company, retain

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<sup>11</sup> Or *word-of-Twitter*, to be more accurate in today’s social media age.

their business, and use that consumer and their potential for discussing their satisfaction to gain more business. However, as Lury (2011) states, “although these exchanges are affective, dynamic and two-way, they are not direct, symmetrical or reversible” (p. 152). Although the increased customer engagement can lead to a positive business relationship, it keeps other relationships hidden (Pavitt, 2000). Among these hidden relationships are the labor conditions in the making of the product, the socioculturally-exploitative means used to sell it, or the ways in which consumers themselves are used as unpaid labor, research and development, or marketing for the company.

The latter of these relationships refers to prosumption, or the merging of production and consumption (Ritzer & Jurgensen, 2010). For example, in 1995 Levi’s created a personalization program in which consumer measurements were entered into a computer, sent to a factory, used to make personally-fitted jeans, and delivered straight to the customer. Levi’s described the program as “a genuine one-on-one relationship with our target consumers” (Lury, 2011; p. 156). While consumers probably received a pair of jeans that was personalized for them, their data (measurements, preferences, etc.) was stored for the Levi’s to access at a later date, they were adopted as salespeople and marketing tools to spread the word, and they most likely paid much more for their jeans (Holloway, 1999). Another relevant example of the consumer-as-producer is the trend of “bro-ing”, or the term for when Nike marketers give shoes and apparel to black, inner-city males to test how they will be received (Klein, 2000). This practice, on its surface, fostered a two-way relationship. Black inner-city consumers were able to receive quality apparel for free, while Nike was able to spread brand recognition and associate themselves with opinion leaders that drive consumption trend. However, Nike’s targeting

of urban, black opinion leaders was aimed at influencing not only the inner-city consumers who wished to emulate these opinion leaders, but also the white mainstream who associated Nike with an urban blackness that, for those removed from it, was a source of fascination (Andrews & Silk, 2011). The benefit for Nike was greater than the benefit for the consumers, while Nike simultaneously used black, inner city males to reproduce the harmful implication of race as a mere aesthetic choice.

Although this “relationship” between brands, consumers, and ambassadors is believed to be mutually-beneficial, the producers benefit exponentially more than the consumers. As Michael Dell of Dell Computers stated in 2001, “our best customers aren’t necessarily the ones that are the largest, the ones that buy the most from us, or the ones that require little help or service... our best customers are those we learn the most from” (Lury, 2011: p. 158). Yet, the consumers that Dell admits are most valuable are rarely compensated accordingly, if at all. This is indicative of Streeck’s (2016) explanation of how effective capitalist marketing “co-opts consumers as co-designers, in an effort to haul more of their as-yet commercially idle wants, or potential wants, into market relations” (p. 99). The capability of customizing sneakers certainly has benefits for consumers, but a critical examination of the motivations of producers for implementing customization is important to keep in mind. Consumers certainly benefit, but one must remember that customization may be the latest mechanism in a long history of brands using gimmicks to stimulate profit over altruism, while fostering insincere relationships with consumers they are often exploiting.

Amongst the almost-infinite amount of literature on consumption and consumer culture, I have attempted to summarize the relevant theories and arguments that are applicable to the consumption of customized sneakers. I specifically explicated four themes: the development of consumerism from modernity to postmodernity, theories regarding the meaning of commodities to individuals and cultures, theories regarding the intersection of identity and consumption, and the role of branding within postmodern consumer culture. Throughout this broad and, at times, sporadic overview, I included perspectives that can be placed at various points on the structure/agency continuum in order to later assist in positioning sneaker customization as an act of individuality or conformity that is mediated through ideological structure or the enactment of agency.

### 2.3 Post-Fordism

The term “post-Fordism”, much like postmodernism, encompasses trends and processes much too broad and eclectic to sufficiently summarize in a single definition. Although it occurs in the economic, political, industrial and geographic spheres (in addition to the cultural sphere), post-Fordism is still more of a debate in literature than a universally-accepted consensus. While scholars generally agree on the core elements of post-Fordism, there still exists contention over theories of its nature, the cause of change from Fordism to post-Fordism, its periodization, its broader effects, and its future (Amin, 1994). While my aim is not to debate these arguments at length, in this section I will briefly mention the main theoretical approaches to understanding post-Fordism, its dialectic relationship with postmodernity and late capitalism, and the ways in which the sneaker industry is a highly-relevant case study in articulating this relationship.

### *2.3.1 What is the 'post' in post-Fordism?*

In order to understand post-Fordism, I must first explain its predecessor of Fordism, the general macroeconomic model of production popularized by Henry Ford around the 1920s and was dominant until about the 1970s. Broadly, Fordism refers to the utilization of mass production to create standardized commodities theoretically applicable to a large quantity of people, reliant upon a detailed and often repetitive division of tasks, mechanization, and Taylorist procedures in efforts to maximize the productivity and efficiency of labor. Gramsci (1971) described Fordism as a more developed form of the small-scale capitalism analyzed by Marx. For Gramsci, Fordism as a “complex, increasingly global capitalism that employs science/technology as its leading productive force, mechanizes production, deskill workers, and generates big firms, big states, and big unions” though the implementation of Ford’s “assembly-line production, managerial hierarchy, and technical control” (Antonio & Bonanno, 2000; p. 34). Key elements of Fordism included: a highly bureaucratic organizational structure with rigid and hierarchized roles; a highly differentiated labor process with an unskilled or semi-skilled predominantly-male workforce; large economies of scale that supported highly-routinized mass production; and standardized commodities produced cost-effectively and efficiently (Antonio & Bonanno, 2000; Mumby, 2013). In addition, Gramsci viewed Fordist production logics as being transferred and infused to the social fabric of broader society, creating “standardized individuals” and a homogeneous mass culture (Antonio & Bonanno, 2000).

Post-Fordism, often understood as stemming from the economic deficiencies of the mid-1970s, represents in some instances an oppositional approach to Fordism, and in other instances, an extension of it (Amin, 1994). Jessop (1994) describes post-Fordism as a double condition. By this, Jessop argues that even as elements of post-Fordism resolved the crises and contradictions of Fordism, it created its own distinct crises and contradictions. In blending the burgeoning post-Fordist literature of his time, Stuart Hall (1988) provided a summary of some of the main trends of post-Fordism:

a shift to the new 'information technologies'; more flexible, decentralised forms of labour process and work organisation; decline of the old manufacturing base and the growth of the 'sunrise', computer-based industries; the hiving-off or contracting-out of functions and services; a greater emphasis on choice and product differentiation, on marketing, packaging and design, on the 'targeting' of consumers by lifestyle, taste and culture rather than by the Registrar General's categories of social class; a decline in the proportion of the skilled, male, manual working class, the rise of the service and white-collar classes and the 'feminisation' of the workforce; an economy dominated by the multinationals, with their new international division of labour and their greater autonomy from nation-state control; the 'globalisation' of the new financial markets, linked by the communications revolution; and new forms of the spatial organisation of social processes. (p. 24, I have added the underline for emphasis)

Essentially, post-Fordism is the current economic system in most of the industrialized world. It involves more flexible, specialized, just-in-time models of production, resulting

from technological innovation and an increasingly white-collar workforce, targeting smaller and more diverse consumer market fragments increasingly organized by identity and lifestyle. Post-Fordism is a more consumption-centric model, leading to companies and brands often attempting to sell their commodities as experiences and lifestyles rather than mere material products (Mumby, 2013). Innovative production models and technologies – such as just-in-time methods in which production materials are accumulated when demanded rather than stored in surplus made possible by increased speed of information flow – enable companies to keep up with fast-changing consumer tastes with minimal waste (Mumby, 2013). Non-price factors –such as quality, performance, experience, aesthetics, responsiveness to customization and consumer demand, and sign-value – challenge the Fordist notion of price as the primary factor in consumer decision making (Jessop, 1992). For this reason, cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984) – marketers, designers, retailers, and producers of concepts derived from culture – are the driving force of post-Fordism, occupying much of the organizational power from engineers, manufacturers, and other heavy laborers that were the focal point of Fordist labor (Slater, 1997).

Much of the analyses of post-Fordism stems from disciplines such as economics, geography, organizational management, and other business-related disciplines. But the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism is not merely a macroeconomic shift; it relies on (and at the same time, influences) various social and cultural processes that are occurring simultaneously. Hall (1988) describes some of these processes: greater fragmentation and pluralism; the weakening collective solidarities and block identities in favor of newer and more flexible identities; the maximization of individuality through personal consumption;



and the return to the individual subject as the center of public life, now understood as incomplete, contradictory, contextual, ever-changing and unstable. Berman (1983) adds that this cultural shift does not represent a total destruction of identities, but a substantial weakening of the boundaries between them. Nevertheless, as Slater (1997) points out, post-Fordist marketing does not unproblematically target and reflect certain lifestyles, signs, and identities, but *actively constitutes them* through interpellation (Althusser, 1971), organizing consumers into cultural categories most beneficial to the production of capital. It is no surprise that post-Fordist economic patterns seem to reflect postmodern cultural patterns, since, following the logic of Jameson (1991), one of the defining features of postmodernism is the merging of the cultural sphere and the economic sphere onto a single plane. In essence, the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism coincides with the broader cultural shift from modernity to postmodernity. Post-Fordism, then, is the economic system most fitting for the current cultural moment of postmodernism.

There are three mainstream theoretical approaches for understanding the transition to and nature of post-Fordism: the regulation approach, the neo-Schumpeterian approach, and the flexible specialization approach (Amin, 1994). First, the regulation approach is centered on long-term economic cycles of stability and change. Specifically, it is concerned with analyzing capitalism's inherent and seemingly-paradoxical tendency to become unstable and self-destruct, along with its simultaneous capability to recover and sustain itself around a certain set of institutions, rules, and norms (Amin, 1994). Regulationists tended to view macro-level economic changes as a result of evolving social practices rather than pre-determined fixtures of inherent economic laws. In addition, they view each economic phase as partial, temporary, and unstable (Jessop,

1992). Second, the neo-Schumpeterian approach is similar to the regulationist approach but puts a greater emphasis on technology and innovation, which this approach credits for spurring macroeconomic transition (Freeman et al., 1982). Third, and perhaps more relevant for our purposes, is the flexible specialization approach. This model focuses heavily on production, and theorizes the capitalist economy as historically balancing two industrial models: mass production (utilizing semi-skilled workers and mechanization to mass-produce standardized goods) and flexible specialization (utilizing skills workers to produce customized goods for specific markets) (Nielsen, 1991; Piore & Sabel, 1984). An in-depth discussion of the strengths, weaknesses, and contributions of each of these approaches is both interesting and necessary for a holistic understanding of post-Fordism. However, for the scope of this project, I will draw elements from these approaches that are most applicable to consumer culture, postmodernism, and the athletic footwear industry.

### *2.3.2 The Cultural Economics of post-Fordism*

Nielsen (1991), working from a regulationist framework, identified two core mechanisms at work during each phase of capitalist development: the “regime of accumulation” and the “mode of regulation.” The regime of accumulation refers to the way in which a system creates capital, or an economic system’s ability to produce and realize surplus value (Esser & Hirsch, 1989). This includes: the organization of labor and production, relations between branches of the economy, wage conditions, patterns of industrial and commercial management, patterns of demand in the workplace, and habits of consumption (Amin, 1994). The mode of regulation refers to the ways in which the

regime of accumulation is reinforced and controlled through social convention, or the formal or informal institutional laws, agreements, policies, and cultural norms which regulate, reproduce, and hegemonically sustain a given system of capital accumulation (Esser & Hirsch, 1989; Lipietz, 1994). Both Fordism and post-Fordism can be better understood through these two lenses. Jessop (1994) explains Fordism using these frameworks. As a *regime of accumulation*, Jessop argues that Fordism “involves a virtuous cycle of growth based on mass production, rising productivity based on economies of scale, rising incomes linked to productivity, increased mass demand due to rising wages, increased profits based on full utilization of capacity, and increased investment in improved mass production equipment and techniques” (p. 136). As for the *modes of regulation*, Jessop argues that Fordism “involves the separation of ownership of control in large corporations with a distinctive multi-divisional, decentralized organization subject to central controls; monopoly pricing; union recognition and collective bargaining; wages indexed to productivity growth and retail price inflation; and monetary emission and credit policies orientated to securing effective aggregate demand” (p. 137). Jessop also addresses the resulting consumption patterns from the Fordist model: the consumption of mass, standardized commodities intended for the nuclear family.

Jessop’s characterization of Fordist elements are ideal-types that Fordism rarely accomplished in reality. Esser and Hirsch (1989) point out how phases of capital development reach a “crisis point” when the regime of accumulation and modes of regulation become out-of-synch. Lipietz (1994) argues that Fordism rested upon the modernist ideals of inevitable social, political, and technical progress in the collective

pursuit of advancing society. The shift away from modernism, in correspondence with the civil rights movements that rejected these modernist notions, spurred a collapse in the social fabric that supported Fordism as a mode of regulation. As Lipietz summarizes the new perspectives of Fordism:

Technical progress? Perhaps, but not at the cost of the impoverishment of work.

Social progress? Perhaps, but not in the anonymous, bureaucratic mould in which the welfare state cast it. A state synthesizing social aspirations and obligations?

Perhaps, but not a state of technocrats imposing their conception of the good and the beautiful, including sending an army to enforce “progress” (p. 343).

The crisis point for Fordism, and the corresponding spawn of post-Fordism, occurred during the recession of the mid-1970s. There were various causes of this. Perhaps most significantly, needs were being fulfilled at pace too fast and stable for the stability of consumer capitalism (Streeck, 2016). Other reasons included a decrease of productivity gains, labor resistance, globalization, downfall of American dominance, inflation of the costs of consumption, and shifting consumer needs and wants (Elam, 1990; Harvey, 1987; Storper, 1989). The latter two reasons, among many others, are at least partially indicative of the cultural shift to postmodernism and its effects on consumer culture as described above. Fordist models of production were centered on the functionality of commodities, and the replacement of use-value by sign-value and commodity aesthetics was not conducive to mass production by semi-skilled workers. The rise of marketing and advertising to cultivate sign-value took a more skilled, educated, white-collar workforce than traditional semi-skilled, blue-collar Fordist workers. The breakdown of fixed identities and modern understandings of generalizable social blocs resulted in a

conundrum for Fordist production tactics that were aimed at a singular mass market. The rise of new manufacturing technology and innovation, primarily the computer, were able to create commodities just as – if not more – efficiently than Fordist mass production.

Mass customization was one of these new technologies that, as Streeck (2016) explains:

accelerated product design and more flexible production equipment and labour made it possible to customize the commodities of the Fordist world to an unprecedented extent, subdividing the large and uniform product runs of industrial mass production into ever-smaller series of differentiated sub-products, in an effort to get closer to the idiosyncratic preferences of ever-smaller groups of potential customers. (p. 98)

These arguments are common among proponents of the flexible specialization approach. This approach generally argues that mass production and flexible specialization are options during any capitalist phase. The option that is more favorable (that is, more lucrative) as a regime of accumulation in certain social, cultural, or economic conditions is the option that the modes of regulation (policies, norms, hegemonic education) will choose to reinforce (Piore & Sabel, 1984). The stagflation of the 1970s proved that Fordism, as a regime of accumulation, was outdated, therefore the transition at that time to the more economically and culturally favorable characteristics of post-Fordism was necessary (Piore & Sabel, 1984).

Esser & Hirsch (1989), while fully understanding the near impossibility of characterizing a new phase of capitalist development at its genesis, attempted to characterize the forms of post-Fordism. As a *regime of accumulation*, they argue that

post-Fordism has five main characteristics: 1) post-Taylorist forms of organizational production and labor based on new information and communications technologies; 2) industrialization of the service sector, leading to changes in the social structure of service workers; 3) a new thrust of capitalization based on the industrialization of various service jobs and agriculture; 4) a decoupling of increases in productivity and the income of the masses; and 5) individualization and pluralization of lifestyles based on socialization through information technology, consumer differentiation, and increased competition for jobs (p. 77). To this list, I would add the commodification of culture and the dominance of symbolic production.

As for the *modes of regulation*, they argue that post-Fordism is associated with: 1) new relationships between branch structures and industry, including a greater concentration on internationalization, innovation, self-employment, and production technology; 2) a quantitative reduction and fragmentation of social security, establishing hierarchical categories of workers; 3) weakening of trade unions stemming from the various processes of labor fragmentation; and 4) new corporate forms, including the interweaving of the state and the technology sector and the selective inclusion of certain workers in corporate arrangements (p. 78). To this list, I would add the decline of Keynesian policy in favor of neoliberalism as a social, economic, and political philosophy and, of course, the rise of postmodernism as a cultural philosophy. Harvey (1994) agrees, stating that “modernism had become closely linked to capital accumulation through a project of Fordist modernization characterized by rationality, functionality, and efficiency...post-modernism, it seems to me, seeks some kind of accommodation with the more flexible regime of accumulation that has emerged since

1973” (p. 363). Harvey goes on to state that postmodernism has played an active, rather than passive, role in promoting the cultural attitudes and practices of flexible post-Fordism. While Harvey’s analysis was centered mainly on urban geography and architecture, the same statements can be applied to postmodern, post-Fordist consumer culture.

To summarize, Fordism generally combined economic, state and social policies to emphasize mass production of standardized commodities targeted towards a theoretically mass consumer base with relatively fixed needs and stable identities based on one’s position in the production process. In theory, it can be argued that mass production led to mass consumption, and since material consumption is active in identity creation, then this mass consumption led to a mass homogeneous identity of consumers who had little consumer choice. Henry Ford himself famously stated that the consumer can have any choice of car color, as long as it’s black (Lury, 2011). In addition to economic, political, and technological developments, the shift to postmodernity played a significant role in the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. Individuals increasingly came to define themselves by their consumption practices rather than their place in the chain of production, and post-Fordist companies capitalized on this shift in identity by targeting smaller and more fragmented consumer markets with personalized commodities engineered aesthetically and symbolically to cater to their corresponding culture, identity, and lifestyle. If the car is considered to be the encapsulation of Fordism, then there is perhaps no better case study for post-Fordism than the athletic sneaker.

## 2.4 Sneaker Literature: Tracing a Symbolic History

This section will explore the symbolic meanings of sneakers within various cultures and subcultures, and the ways in which post-Fordist sneaker companies specifically constructed the sneaker as a symbol of lifestyle, status and identity through racially-coded marketing, advertising, branding, and other tactics. Additionally, I will discuss how the sneaker industry used these significations to actively create a consumer base, thereby in the process inventing consumer identities for which the sneaker is a prominent (and almost necessary) symbol of expression. As the following explanation will demonstrate, members of certain cultures not only actively infused meaning into sneakers, but, contrarily, sneakers came to become a sign of who was a member of a specific culture. It is due to this top-down directionality of meaning construction and subsequent interpellation by the sneaker industry that sneaker customization emerged as a method of symbolic creativity.

### *2.4.1 Shifting Symbolisms of Shoes*

Although the current athletic footwear landscape did not begin to take shape until the early-20<sup>th</sup> century, footwear in the pre-modern era carried significant sociocultural meaning. In most ancient civilizations, footwear was a luxury to be possessed by those of high social status, while those of lower social status (most often, poor people and slaves) went barefoot (DeMello, 2009). The functional uses and social attitudes towards shoes were often a source of cultural difference between colonial and indigenous peoples and were used as a means of assimilation, degradation, and solidarity in the negotiation of cultural identity between colonizers and the colonized (Miner, 2009).



In the United States, the style, and sometimes mere possession, of footwear was tied to one's perceived humanity. Miner (2009) discusses how:

by choosing a specific shoe that is respected within one's community, one is able to position himself as "respectable"... On the other hand, the nakedness of feet, or rather the absence of shoes, has often represented the absence of one's humanity.

When someone lacks the ability to wear shoes, either by force or through lack of resources, their ability to be fully human is also negated (p. 85).

Miner (2009) proceeds to provide anecdotes from Frederick Douglass (1854) and Harriet Jacobs (1861) about footwear in American slavery. Douglass points out how slave owners did not see slaves as human and therefore not worthy of footwear, which sometimes resulted in slaves catching frostbite and losing toes during brutal weather conditions. Jacobs (1861) documented the potential of footwear as a means to cross racial boundaries by forming economic solidarity with poor whites, who also lacked footwear, and subsequently raising cross-racial class consciousness (Douglass & Jacobs, 2000).

These examples provide an early demonstration of how footwear was used by dominant groups (slave owners) to reinforce the dehumanization of those they perceived as subhuman, yet was symbolically subverted by dominated groups (slaves and poor whites) to ideologically challenge the oppressive hegemonic order.

The rise of the modern "sneaker", the staple of athletic footwear, began in 1839 when the vulcanization process that made the modern sneaker possible was patented by American inventor Charles Goodyear (Vanderbilt, 1998). Sneakers slowly innovated as the market increased, spurred by what were designated by elite culture as "proper" types of sneakers being mandated for use of public parks and tennis courts. In the context of the

Muscular Christianity movement, sneakers were also mandated for membership into the Young Men's Christian Association's (YMCA), and their emerging sports of basketball and volleyball (Fuller, 2015). By the turn of the century, early versions of sneakers for specialized sports were being produced by small rubber companies and sporting goods manufacturers such as B.F. Goodrich and A.G. Spalding Co. (Vanderbilt, 1998). The first branded sneaker, the Converse "All-Star" (aka the first Chuck Taylor), was produced in 1917, a moment generally viewed as the beginning of "sneaker culture"<sup>12</sup> (Fuller, 2015). Converse would continue to hold a near monopoly on the athletic footwear industry until the late 1960s (Vanderbilt, 1998).

The sneaker market expanded significantly upon the increased emphasis on health and physical fitness following World War I. The "strenuous life" ethos engulfed national sporting discourse during this time, in which physical strength, toughness, masculinity, and athletic success was accentuated upon America's men in order to maintain perceived American exceptionalism and preparedness for military conflict. "Proper" athletic attire, including footwear, was viewed as essential for American men to fulfill their "national calling"<sup>13</sup> and achieve peak physical form (Fuller, 2015). Women were generally excluded from the predominantly-masculine space of sport and the physical fitness craze, but were beginning to gain access to certain athletic spaces (Cahn, 1994). Sneaker companies began producing sneakers for women in the 1920s, but a highly-feminized version that included a heel lift and effectively reproduced the hegemonic boundaries of

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<sup>12</sup> By this term, I mean an entire subculture organized a common admiration for and knowledge of sneakers.

<sup>13</sup> In the Cold War context, men were encouraged to (re)gain strength and toughness through physical activity in order to quell the (fabricated) anxiety that Soviet men were tougher, stronger, and more fit for a potential war (Montez de Oca, 2005).

masculinity and femininity within sport that often emphasized moderation and sexualization of women rather than athletic prowess (Cahn, 1994; Fuller, 2015).

The brand Adidas experienced considerable growth during the World War II era, not in spite of but *because of* the geopolitics of the time. The success of African-American sprinter Jesse Owens spoiled the intentions of Hitler to use the Olympics to flaunt notions of perceived Aryan athletic superiority. Ironically, Owens won his four gold medals wearing German-made track shoes produced by a company called Dassler Brothers Sport Shoe Factory co-ran by Adolf ‘Adi’ Dassler and Rudi Dassler<sup>14</sup> (Coles, 2016). Understanding that the best advertisement was celebrity endorsement and that Owens was the top sprinting talent in the world, Adi ardently attempted to get Owens to wear Dassler track cleats during the Olympics, despite the anti-Aryan milieu in 1930s Germany and the substantial risks involved in helping non-Aryans (especially at the expense of German athletes). Coles (2016) points out how this decision was beneficial for Adi in the long-run, not only financially but most likely for the survival of his future company Adidas. When the War was turning sour for Germany and Hitler suspended domestic civilian factory production in favor of military production, the Dassler Shoe Factory was forced to produce bombs. Allied forces found the shoe-turned-bomb factory and were prepared to destroy it, until apparently Adi’s wife told them that Owens’ gold-medal winning shoes were produced there. The factory survived, was turned back into an Adidas shoe factory, and enjoyed global post-War success as the company became associated with Owens’ personal celebrity status, Olympic success, and symbolic resistance to an authoritative political order.

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<sup>14</sup> After an irreconcilable feud, the brothers later split up, with Adi going on to form Adidas and Rudi going on to form Puma, two of the leading sporting footwear manufacturers to this day.

#### *2.4.2 Adidas, Nike, and Racial Encoding of Sneakers*

As footwear evolved into the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, shoe production heavily followed the broader trends of post-Fordism and began to become more predicated upon marketing and advertising than material production. Through intricate and intentional symbolic campaigning, sneakers became positioned and marketed as an extension of one's current or aspirational cultural identity (Vanderbilt, 1998). The use-value of footwear became replaced by sign-value. This process is consistent with how Jhally (1989), echoing Baudrillard, described objects in the age of advertising, explaining that in a world where objects, their producers, and their consumers have no anchored meaning, advertising is monumental in filling in that meaning in a way that is affective and evocative enough to be profitable (Lury, 2011). Within this process, Ewen (1976) argues that this process is functional because the shared vocabulary of a consumer item's image, appearance, and style contributed to a shift away from an understanding of self-identity as internal and towards an understanding of self-identity through external, presentational characteristics, such as footwear (Lury, 2011). Through various (and I argue, manipulative) marketing tactics, sneakers began to be positioned as a significant cultural commodity, especially to the urban, African-American, mostly male, community. As I will explain, sneakers became more than just a trend; they become a means in which African-American males build and express identity and negotiate inter- and intra-cultural membership status (Wilson, 1996).

After World War II, Adidas quickly became one of the world's leading athletic footwear manufacturers and was worn by all the elite soccer and track and field athletes

(Turner, 2015). Sneakers, at this time, were already becoming established as a badge of masculinity a signifier of social status. A 1962 New York Times article referred to the basketball sneaker as a “symbol of admission to full-fledged boyhood” (Bender, 1962; cited in Turner, 2015). In addition, the sneaker’s increased prominence followed the ascension of basketball into the national American sporting landscape. The rise of the NBA, televised basketball, and faster and more agile playing styles that made the shortcomings of previous sneaker models apparent were all factors that lead to increased visibility of the athletic sneaker<sup>15</sup> (Turner, 2015).

In the late 1960s, in response to a perceived lack of adequately functional sneakers, Adidas began to produce one of its most lucrative and culturally-relevant sneakers: the Superstar. By virtue of its use-value, the Superstar was recognized as a superior option to existing sneakers on the market at that time, and were worn by top college and professional teams, as well as casual, urban “schoolyard” basketball players (Turner, 2015). The Superstar was worn not only by popular national celebrity idols of consumption, but also by local playground legends whom the local basketball communities admired. Its high cost – double the price of Converse shoes – deemed it exclusive. However, through a negotiation of production and consumptive practices, Turner (2015) argues that the Superstar soon came to be an unexpected signifier of a largely African-American hip-hop subculture in 1970s New York City that encompassed rap music, breakdancing, and graffiti art. Hip-hop had its own distinctive style of which

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<sup>15</sup> I limit my analysis of literature to basketball sneakers, even though my empirical analysis includes those who have customized non-basketball shoes (such as running shoes, casual shoes, knits, and cleats). I do this for a few reasons. First, industry sneaker customization has predominantly included only basketball sneakers, and the majority of my participants customized basketball sneakers. Second, my interest in sneakers has always been in basketball sneakers. Third, very little popular or academic sources have written about non-basketball sneakers.

sneakers were a large part. Rose (1994) describes this subculture as based on the “appropriation and critique via style” of the white mainstream. Rose explains that “the kids who created hip-hop were bricoleurs, appropriating everyday items such as the sports shoe and giving them new meanings that expressed their frustration at their marginalized position in society” (Rose, 1994; cited in Turner, 2015; p. 139-140). Hip-hop subculture, then, can be understood as part of a long tradition of African-American urban youth using dress and style to subvert perceived authority while simultaneously forging collective identity amongst its constituents. In other words, the styles associated were a form of symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990). Basketball, and subsequently the sneaker, were central themes of hip-hop culture and style.

This relationship was solidified – and magnified – by Run-DMC’s appropriation of the brand Adidas. Run-DMC was one of the most successful rap groups of the 1980s and is largely seen as responsible for shifting rap music from fringe to globally mainstream. Their style – black jeans, black leather jackets, and ‘Superstar’ shoes – gave off a “ghettocentric” (Andrews & Silk, 2010) look of perceived street authenticity to the white mainstream consumer base. The Superstar shoes became a symbol of this authenticity in the minds of consumers both inside and outside the hip-hop subculture. By adorning the Superstar, consumers both inside and outside of the hip-hop subculture, of various races, classes, and regions, could demonstrate their desired connection to hip-hop, basketball, and the proverbial “streets” (Turner, 2015).

However, as previously discussed, post-Fordist industries in part target various identities, subcultures, and styles for commercial gain, in the process actively constituting them. On a wider scale, this manipulation articulates the relationship between this

commodity-signs and racial/cultural groups, as if a relationship is essential. Adidas can certainly be accused of this calculated utilization of race. Adidas did not capitalize on this cultural connection between sneakers and hip-hop culture right away. In 1986, Run-DMC released a song titled “My Adidas” that was about hip-hop’s origins and the Superstar that, at that point, was a staple of the group’s global reputation. However, as Turner (2015) describes, this was not an innocent ode to the brand; it was a deliberate attempt to secure Adidas’ attention and finally benefit financially from the impact the group had on sales and hype. After releasing the single, Run-DMC sent Adidas a video pointing to the commercial success of themselves and the Superstar and demanded one million dollars. Eventually, Adidas reached a deal with the group and the Run-DMC became the first non-sports endorsement for the athletic footwear industry.

As the use-value of the Superstar began to decline in the mid-1980s with the rise of more functional models from Reebok and Nike, Adidas increasingly embraced Run-DMC and hip-hop culture as a way to stimulate sales. The brand consistently highlighted them in company newsletters, trade shows, television advertisements, and even gave them their own line of apparel that was designed in the essence of the dominant commercial representation of urban, African-American fashion. This apparel was not made to sell back to the hip-hop subculture, but was diffused mainly to white, middle-class audiences, some of whom “blackophilic” (fascinated with exotic and erotic blackness) and “blackophobic” (fearful of the same blackness they fetishize) (Andrews & Silk, 2010).

This development is indicative of how Clarke (2007[1976]) describes the process of defusion, as a grass-roots reappropriation of a subcultural style in order to make it

widely-profitable, oftentimes stripping it from the context of the group which creatively assembled it. Engaging Clarke's theoretical approach, Adidas was fearful of blackness until they realized it was a signifier of identity that they could sell to postmodern consumer audiences, who viewed race as a style or aesthetic that can be playfully and fluidly acquired through symbolic material consumption. The form of blackness that sneaker industries constructed through commercial advertising was, as Vanderbilt (1998) describes, one of "menacing embodiment of hard-edged street credibility, hulking performers of super-heroically charged exploits, or cartoonish cross-dressing jesters" (p. 35). This, of course, constituted an ideological image of blackness to white audiences who may "consume" blackness yet still harbor regressive racial ideologies. As Michael Eric Dyson (1993) argues, "the ingenious manner in which black cultural nuances of cool, hip, and chic have influenced the broader American landscape" (cited in Vanderbilt, 1998; p. 33). The Run-DMC and Adidas relationship foreshadowed a complex interconnection over the next few decades between sports, hip-hop, African-Americans, the athletic footwear industry, and consumer identity (Miner, 2009).

Nike began its Air Jordan' marketing campaign in 1985 when NBA star Michael Jordan signed a contract with them after his preferred shoe was reportedly denied by Adidas (Miner, 2009). Athletes had signed endorsements with footwear corporations prior to Jordan, but were only required by contract to wear sneakers from that brand. The Air Jordan campaign was novel in that it was the first time an athlete had a sneaker specifically designed and marketed for them. At this time, Nike's market strategy was to target young athletes by providing sneakers for them through youth athletics, high school,



and college athletics, thereby hoping to establish brand loyalty through reaching the consumer first (Turner, 2015). However, with the endorsement of Michael Jordan, Nike inserted itself into the racial and cultural politics of the sneaker market, in a less subtle but equally-impactful manner compared to Adidas. Largely ignoring women, the Air Jordan campaign targeted males almost exclusively, as Jordan's image was constructed in the hegemonic image of masculinity (albeit one that crossed boundaries of race and class) that was presented as compulsory for athletic success in sport and commercial success (Miner, 2009).

Nike also attempted to capitalize on the relationship between African-Americans and sneakers, specifically in and through Jordan, whom Andrews (1996) calls a "racial floating signifier." Incorporating Spike Lee's sneaker-obsessed character Mars Blackmon from *She's Gotta Have It*, Nike created commercials consisting of dialogues between Blackmon and Jordan. With hip-hop instrumentals and feats of physicality by Jordan weaved throughout, these commercials had Blackmon asking Jordan what was responsible for his unmatched basketball talent. After asking whether it was the shorts, haircut, finally concluding that "it's gotta be the shoes" (Wilson, 1996). Amidst common, albeit highly problematic, understandings of race that considered blacks to have a biological physical superiority, Nike's commercials presented the Air Jordan sneakers as an object that those who were not black could consume in order to compensate for their perceived biological deficiency. As Miner (2009) explains, "by buying Air Jordan sneakers, white Americans could transgress their biological failure at basketball through consumption" (p. 90).

Although Jordan famously maintained a political-neutrality, the process in which Jordan's brand was constructed was not apolitical. As Andrews (1996) argues, Jordan's carefully constructed corporate image was created in such a manner that depoliticized and deracialized Jordan himself. Jordan was implicitly marketed as a successful agent of 1980s-'90s Reaganite neoliberal discourses around post-racial society in which race isn't much more than an aesthetic factor in the perceived meritocracy. Jordan as a signifier was not stable; rather it "floated" to incorporate various, and sometimes contradictory, articulations of the cultural politics of blackness. At times he embodied a sense of wholesomeness, personal responsibility, and virtuosity atypical of hegemonic ideas of blackness; a type of representation that favored the dominant politics of hard-bodied masculine Reaganism, corporatization, colorblindness, and later, a common-sense back-to-the-basics attitude that was deemed necessary by conservative political ideology (Andrews, 1996). At other times, he embodied innate black physicality rendered docile by the achievement of a white cultural model of hard work, respect, and personal responsibility. Jordan was arguably the most recognizable face in the world around this time as a black male, and the way he was marketed implied that Jordan's success was earned through merit and smart choices, undeterred by the social ramifications of race. The Jordan campaign reproduced the erroneous and disingenuous notion propagated by powerful groups that nothing, including race and class, is an excuse for not achieving the perceived American dream.

Yet, Nike and Jordan found a way to maintain the "cool" and rebellious ethos of Jordan shoes, in a non-threatening way to them. Jordan's red and black signature sneakers went against NBA policy that stated that the shoes had to match team colors,

leading to a \$5,000 fine for each game that Jordan wore them. As the story is commonly told today, Jordan continued to wear these sneakers for each game with Nike paying the fine (Fuller, 2015), although others claim that there is no evidence that Jordan wore the sneakers during games and was fined for it (DePaula, 2016). Regardless of myth or fact, Nike capitalized on the opportunity by creating an entire campaign around this moment, portraying the shoe as the epitome of rebellion and therefore “cool”, as McGuigan (2006) would argue. One of Nike’s commercials, speaking to the consumer, stated “Nike created a revolutionary new basketball shoe...the NBA threw them out of the game. Fortunately, the NBA can’t keep you from wearing them” (Fuller, 2015: 117). This was at the heart of the paradoxical implications of Nike’s campaign around Jordan; that rebellion is “cool”, but only in a superficially vague and marketable way, yet Jordan the (black) man is successful because of his lack of rebellion, essentially his willingness to stay in his “place.” His (in)famous political neutrality (allegedly stemming from his quote “Republicans buy sneakers too”) is controversial to this day (Rhoden, 2006), but was a necessary signified position of a potentially-resistant figure that dominant groups defused and diffused for decades.

In the 90s however, certain political groups (even Bill Cosby in his infamous pound cake speech<sup>16</sup>) began to position the sneaker as a microcosm of the ills of African-African society. Sneakers became articulated as a symbol of harmful and vacuous self-indulgence, indicative of detrimental financial planning among African-Americans.

Sneakers became tied to drug culture purely through rhetoric, with a 1990 Sports

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<sup>16</sup> Cosby is reported to have said: "These people [black parents] are not parenting. They are buying things for their kids – \$500 sneakers for what? And won't spend \$200 for 'Hooked on Phonics.' . . . They're standing on the corner and they can't speak English" (Lee, May 22, 2004; para. 3).

Illustrated article claiming that “certain drug dealers feverishly load up on the latest models of sneakers, tossing out any old ones that are scuffed or even slightly worn and replacing them with new pairs...drug dealers, man, they set the fashion trends” (Telander, 1990, May 4). Sneakers became an example incorporated into the racist trope of the welfare queen, who is purposefully lazy in efforts to receive government assistance, which is then spent on material objects rather than the bare necessities that government assistance was intended to be for. After instances of violence during waits for new sneakers in black communities (colloquially termed the “sneaker killings”), the sneaker even became a symbol of what was perceived to be the trivial motivations of criminality within the black community and in the context of the early-1990s “tough-on-crime” rhetoric (Fuller, 2015). Despite this political positioning of footwear by powerful groups, individuals from the everyday streets to the top athletes in the world have shifted the narrative around footwear by rearticulating the sneaker as a signifier of black pride, political expression and resistance, artistic expression, solidarity with oppressed groups, and even promotion of charitable causes.

This commercially-constructed articulation of sneaker as essential to blackness has an ideological effect on at least some individuals. Wilson (1996), in attempting to understand how Jordan-era sneaker commercials were decoded by youth, found that that black respondents “appeared to identify with, support, and adulate” (p. 413) the celebrity athletes used by footwear marketers to stimulate demand. Black respondents often viewed these models of consumption as role models, whereas non-black respondents admired the athletes but were not influenced by them to the same extent as black respondents were. Having the athletic “look” (embracing the style and signature sneakers

of black celebrity athletes they identified with) was often necessary for social acceptance for black respondents, although not all conformed to it in the same manner. Race, specifically performing blackness as commercially represented, was overall the central factor through which consumptive practices were framed. Possessing the popular cultural products associated with black celebrity athletes gave black respondents a sense of cultural power and pride (Wilson, 1996), although the footwear industry certainly benefitted more. Regardless of the balance, black youth seemed to decode the representation of the relationship between blackness and sneakers in a “dominant” (Hall, 1980) manner, or interpellated in a way that reproduced dominant ideologies. However, these participants were only granted the choice of consuming styles already designed by the sneaker companies that were responsible for the encoding of this racial relationship. No research to this point has examined the ways in which consumers “encode” (Hall, 1980) their own sneakers through customization, and the extent to which they do so in accordance with (or in resistance to) the ideological articulation of sneakers described above. This project will contribute to existing literature by critically examining not only the meanings consumers attach to customized sneakers, but the broader processes in which the practice emerged and remains relevant within.

In summary of this theoretical overview, I have discussed four contextual forces regarding sneaker customization: postmodernism, consumer culture, post-Fordism, and the historical symbolic encoding of sneakers. In each of these, I have explored concepts, theories, and arguments that exist within the literature that assist in understanding the significance of symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990) and sneaker customization. These

concepts will be used as a foundation for constructing my methodology and frameworks for discussing my final empirical analysis.

## CHAPTER THREE: Overview of Methodology

This section will provide an overview of my methodology. I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with individuals who have customized sneakers to understand why they did so, how they did so, and the meanings they attach to customization. First, I will explain and justify my social constructivist, postmodern paradigm. Then I will detail the procedures I used, as well as my sample and my recruitment of participants. Then I explain how I used thematic analysis to organize and express my data. Articulation will then be discussed as my method of linking my data to the broader theoretical concepts and contextual forces described above. Finally, I will outline my reflexivity, how I represented my participants, and my criteria for evaluation.

### 3.1 Postmodernism as a Paradigm

The methodology of this thesis is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research generally aims to emphasize the qualities of entities and the processes that are not measured or examined in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Instead, qualitative research assesses the socially-constructed nature of reality and the ask questions regarding how social experience is created and given meaning, while simultaneously acknowledging the fact that knowledge is a collaboratively-constructed by both the researcher and the participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This project rejects positivism, and instead operates under the social constructivist paradigm. Whereas positivism suggests that there exists universal truth and knowledge that can be obtained through the objective, detached, infallible scientific method, a social

constructivist framework sees truth and knowledge as subjective, pluralistic, and constructed through social, cultural, and historical relations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A constructivist paradigm is anti-foundational, as it assumes a relativist ontology in which individuals construct multiple meanings of reality, contingent upon individual experience and context rather than one concrete, universal reality. It also assumes a subjectivist epistemology in which objectivity is an unrealistic goal, and instead it is acknowledged that the researcher and participants collaborate in constructing truths and knowledges (Markula & Silk, 2011). However, that does not mean that “anything goes” in the research. Some interpretations of reality are more plausible than others. One does not have to sacrifice rigor when conducting qualitative, constructivist research, but one must shift the standards of evaluation of what rigorous research entails (I will describe my standard of evaluation later).

In studying the implications of postmodern on consumer culture, it may be unsurprising that I invoked a postmodern research paradigm. The paradigm of postmodern research shares certain elements with the cultural condition of postmodernism, however there are a few differences. The postmodern paradigm builds upon the social constructivist paradigm, which understands the social world to be complex with individuals defining their own meanings, and a primary goal of research being to “understand the individuals’ behaviours, meanings and experiences within particular social settings” (Markula & Silk, 2011; p. 31). Like the cultural condition, a postmodern paradigm rejects universal, generalizable meta-narratives and a concrete reality. Instead, postmodern research understands the world to be made up of fragmented



truths and realities, often prone to rapid fluidity, irrationality, and contradiction (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Postmodern research typically has no qualms about critiquing social relations in order to spark change. Power (and subsequently, resistance to power) is often central to postmodern analyses, or at least the type of analysis I am pursuing (Markula & Silk, 2011). The poststructural strand of postmodern research often views power in a Foucauldian sense: not as top-down and coercive, but as dispersed throughout society, operating through everyday practices, and embedded within discourse and knowledge (Foucault, 1978; Markula & Silk, 2011). While power may not be transparent in the relationship between sneakers, identity, and postmodern consumer culture, that does not mean it is not present. The modernist view of power – which often analyzes situations in terms of a dichotomous dominant/dominated – is diminished, but its legacy is still internalized within individuals. Power is deeply embedded within the consensual language and hegemonic discourses that shape knowledge, discipline behavior, construct significations, and ultimately influence the development of individual subjectivity. This is an important distinction that I want to make clear. I am not examining the meanings that consumers attach to sneaker customization because I believe that meaning making is a completely autonomous practice. The reason I examine these meanings is to understand the ways in which, and extent to which, participants' attitudes and practices are influenced by power. Whether this power operates top-down or in a “capillary-like” fashion (Foucault, 1978), this project uncovers these seemingly-hidden power structures and directionalities.

### 3.2 Procedures

My main method of gathering data was in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals who have customized sneakers. Conversations are a useful way to facilitate personal communication and provide rich illumination of personal experience, meaning, values, context, motivation, behavior, etc (Smith & Sparkes, 2017). The main strength of semi-structured interviewing is its flexibility, allowing the researcher to probe certain areas, back off other areas, and tailor each interview to the needs and comfortability of the subject. Nonetheless, within my constructivist paradigm, I approached interviews not as reflections of knowledge and reality but as active constitutors of it (Stroh, 2000). Within my interviews, I asked four types of open-ended questions (borrowed from Patton, 1990): demographic questions (regarding identifying individual characteristics), experience/behavior questions (regarding what an individual does or has done), opinion questions (regarding individuals' thoughts, interpretations, goals, intentions, desires, and values), and feeling questions (regarding understanding emotional, affective responses to phenomena). Below is my interview guide. These questions served as my basis, but were adjusted, extend, and follow-up as deemed necessary.

Order	Question	Type of Question (Patton, 1990)
1	What is your name? Age? Location?	Demographic
2	What do sneakers mean to you? What do your sneakers mean to you?	Opinion and feeling
3	Why did you want to customize sneakers? How did you do so?	Experience/behavior and opinion
4	*ask specific questions regarding designs, text, meaning on custom shoes after seeing them*	Opinion and feeling
5	In what settings do you wear your shoes? Around who? How often?	Experience/behavior

6	Within your social circle, what is the significance of having customized sneakers?	Experience/behavior, opinion and feeling
7	How do you feel when you wear your shoes?	Feeling
8	When people see your shoes, what do you think they assume about you?	Opinion
9	What was your experience like customizing shoes?	Experience/behavior
10	Who do you think is the target market for the sneaker industry?	Opinion
11	Do you think sneaker industry advertising has an effect on you? Has it had an effect on how you chose to customize your shoes?	Opinion and feeling
12	What do you think are the current and future implications of sneaker customization on the sneaker industry as a whole?	Opinion

After receiving International Review Board (IRB) approval, I conducted one interview per participant. Interviews ranged from 15-45 minutes, with the average being around 30 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded for transcription purposes, with consent. I took notes regarding tone, body language, and events that occurred during interviews. I also took notes of my observations while recruiting at sneaker conventions, some of which appear in my final analysis. Interviews were transcribed after they were conducted. Once transcriptions were complete, data was de-identified and pseudonyms were given in place of participants' names. Those pseudonyms are used throughout the duration of this thesis. Any identifying information included in quotes (such as cities, nicknames, business names, etc) is redacted. Transcriptions then were systematically coded twice<sup>17</sup> to identify themes. There were no known risks or benefits to participants.

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<sup>17</sup> Per Clarke & Braun's (2006) recommendation.

All data is kept confidential, secured through a password-protected laptop accessible only to me, and will be destroyed after seven years in line with IRB policy.

### *3.2.1 Sample*

I utilized what Patton (2003) calls homogenous, criterion sampling to recruit the 15 participants that I interviewed. All participants met the criteria of being 18 years or older, having customized shoes in the past 10 years, and having lived in the United States for at least 5 years. I used snowball sampling to recruit three of my participants, who I interviewed per the suggestion of other participants. Data from all 15 interviews are included at least once in my analysis. I limited my participant sample to legal adults for convenience of study and their superior experience in consumer culture. Participants must have customized shoes, but I limited it to the past 10 years due to the constant evolving nature of the footwear industry, customization technology and process available, and state of consumer culture. Too much has changed in the past 10 years for any previous customization experiences to be applicable to the current moment. I limited my analysis to American consumer culture for the sake of brevity and familiarity, and I believe that 5 years living in America is long enough to be thoroughly engrossed as an American consumer.

Of the 15 participants in my sample, 13 were men and two were women<sup>18</sup>. Participants' age ranged from 21 to 38, with eight participants in their 20s and seven participants in their 30s. All participants were born in the United States. 10 of the 15 participants identified as African-American, three identified as mixed (two were white

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<sup>18</sup> This, unfortunately, was roughly representative of the gender breakdown of the sneaker conventions I recruited at.

and black, one was white and Filipino), one identified as Latino, and one identified as Pakistani. Eight of the participants customized sneakers with the intention to sell them, five of the participants customized only for themselves, and two of the participants customized as part of organizational initiatives. All participants met the stated criteria<sup>19</sup>.

### *3.2.2 Recruitment*

I recruited individuals who have experience with sneaker customization that met the sample criteria listed above. To find individuals who likely met this criterion, I attended two local sneaker conventions where I met 13 of my 15 participants. I started by looking for individuals who were wearing sneakers that looked like they were customized to approach. Eventually, I began to ask random attendees if they had any experience with sneaker customization (as I will explain in the analysis, this presented difficulty as participants' definitions of sneaker customization were much narrower than mine). I then approached individuals by asking if their sneakers were customized, or if they have customized sneakers in the past. If they said yes, I explained my research interest and asked if they would be willing to participate in an interview. When they agreed, I asked if they would prefer to do the interview right there at the convention, or at a later time, date, and location of their choosing. All of the 13 participants preferred to conduct the interview at that moment at the sneaker convention. After finding a place where we could sit down and hear each other, I explained the project and parameters of consent. Participants then signed the consent form. Then after receiving consent to record, we began the interview. During, and sometimes after the interview, I asked participants to

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<sup>19</sup> See breakdown of sample characteristics in Appendix B.

provide me with pictures of their customized sneakers. Some participants allowed me to take a photo of sneakers they were currently wearing, some participants sent pictures to my email after the interview, and some participants referred me to their social media account for pictures. All pictures included in my analysis have been redacted of any potentially identifying information. After the interview was finished, I asked participants if they knew any other sneaker customizers. I then thanked the participants for interviewing and wrote down their contact information (an email or phone number) in case further contact was necessary.

The 14<sup>th</sup> participant was recommended to me by two of the previous participants, who each gave me the contact information for that participant. I then contacted that participant and set up a date and time to travel to a location of their choosing to conduct the interview. The 15<sup>th</sup> participant was one that I contacted after seeing an indication via the Internet that the participant may be involved in sneaker customization. After contacting that participant, I met them at a time and place of their choosing. For both of these two participants, interviews were conducted in the same manner as the interviews at the sneaker convention.

### 3.3 Thematic Analysis

This project employs thematic analysis as its method of data organization and expression. Broadly, thematic analysis aims to identify or interpret patterns or “themes” within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2006). A main strength of this approach is its flexibility, as it can be applied and utilized for a wide-range of qualitative projects and can be combined with multiple paradigms. However, this flexibility does not mean that

thematic analysis is easy. Themes do not just ‘emerge’ organically and automatically from the data. As Clarke and Braun (2006) warn, it requires an “active and systematic engagement of the researcher with the data” (p. 85) to rigorously interpret, analyze, and construct themes out of often disparate data points. While thematic analysis can be employed in a positivist, quantitative manner, this project utilizes what Clarke and Braun (2006) call the “Big Q” approach, which they define as a qualitative technique coupled with qualitative paradigms that embraces researcher subjectivity and aims to produce contextualized understandings of data themes. Working from constructivist paradigms, researchers employing the Big Q approach are metaphorical “sculptors” of themes rather than “archaeologists” – meaning they utilize their research skills, experience, disciplinary knowledge, and subjectivity to produce analyses rather than simply “find” analyses among the data.

Although postmodern/poststructural research is constructivist in nature, it is important for postmodern researchers to have clearly-delineated theoretical frameworks to analyze the data (Markula & Silk, 2011). Without these frameworks, participant responses (the data) are too complex, overwhelming, and sporadic to make any sense of. From the interview data, I drew eight themes total; four themes for each of the two sections of my analysis. A data point qualified as a theme if it constituted a “general pattern of meaning” (Clarke & Braun, 2006), which I defined as a point that: was semantically or latently present in three or more participants’ responses, corresponded in some way with pre-existing theoretical frameworks, and were relevant to my research questions. My themes overlapped, as certain data points were central to the explication of multiple themes. Rather than analyzing these overlapping data points in-depth at each

moment they were necessary, I made the decision to analyze them fully in the theme that I found them most relevant. For this reason, some quotes or data points are deferred to a later discussion, or referenced with the qualifier of “described previously”. This avoided bulkiness and repetition, although it sometimes required a sacrifice of thoroughness in contextualization.

After transcription, I coded the data deductively, using the pre-existing theories and concepts (described above) as a lens for analyzing the data. I also analyzed semantic and latent meaning, as both types were necessary for answering my research questions. Semantic meaning was useful in understanding the subject motivations and reasons for customizing shoes the way they did, but interrogating the latent meaning allowed me to articulate those motivations within the influence of broader social and cultural forces. During coding, I followed the steps laid out by Clarke and Braun (2006): familiarizing myself with the data, two rounds of coding the data systematically and descriptively, identifying patterns and constructing themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing the thematic analysis through an analytic narrative.

### 3.4 Articulation

I employ Stuart Hall’s concept of articulation in order to position the themes produced from the thematic analysis among the broader social, political, economic, ideological, and technological forces that constitute it. Hall rejected the orthodox Marxist view of all sociocultural relations being directly determined by the economic base. Instead, he merged Marxist theory with Althusser’s (1971) work on ideology and Gramsci’s (1973) work on hegemony to produce an approach that analyzed social



formations in a way that accounted for not just the economic, but the cultural, political, ideological, and the potential for individual agency (Clarke, 2015). Hall termed this approach “articulation” and viewed it as both a theory and method of tracing and linking these complex social formations. Articulation was at the foundation of Hall’s vision for cultural studies, as it “linked his approach to thinking about social formations, his orientation to culture as the site of ideological and political struggles and the problematic politics of constructing counter-hegemonic possibilities in popular politics” (Clarke, 2015; p. 276). To understand a cultural phenomenon, for Hall, was to analyze both the specific social conditions in which that phenomenon exists and the intentional human practices through which it is reproduced. Hall explained his approach in his own words:

by the term ‘articulation’, I mean a connection or link which is not necessarily given in all cases, as a law or a fact of life, but which requires particular conditions of existence to appear at all, which has to be positively sustained by specific processes, which is not ‘eternal’ but has to be constantly renewed, which can under some circumstances disappear or be overthrown, leading to the old linkages being dissolved and new connections – re-articulations – being forged (Hall, 1985; cited in Clarke, 2015; p. 277).

Because the connections that produce certain phenomena are irreducible to single determining factor, they never guaranteed for Hall. For this reason, articulation must fulfill the important role of analyzing the specific conditions of particular articulations in order for critical intellectuals to understand them, expose them politically and pedagogically, and if necessary, theorize alternative articulations (Clarke, 2015).

Slack (1996) describes how articulation can work as both a theory and a method. Theoretically, articulation refers to Hall's process of forging connections between complex and seemingly-disparate contexts. Additionally, it involves characterizing the social formations that produce a certain phenomenon, creating "unity of two different elements, under certain conditions" as Hall (1986, p. 53) states. Methodologically, articulation provides a framework for the study of culture and how to contextualize the object of one's analysis. Grossberg (1992) describes his interpretation of articulation as "the production of identity on top of differences, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices" (p. 54). This project articulates the significance of symbolic creativity and the cultural politics of sneaker customization to the broader forces that influence it.

Despite my explication (in the theoretical overview) of the contexts that I believed to be most applicable for understanding the meanings of customization, I was careful to remember that these conceptual frameworks are not guaranteed and cannot be used in replacement of rigorous analysis. When articulating, one cannot use theory as a way to be let "off the hook" by providing the answers in advance (Grossberg, 1992). Instead, theory must be used to ground our engagement with the empirical, think with and through, and ultimately "wrestle with" in order to move "a little further down the road" in understanding elements of complex phenomena (Hall, 1992; Slack, 2006). The theories and concepts that I provided in my theoretical overview are useful to my analysis, but ultimately were inadequate, since no theory can ever determine in advance or produce an exact fit (Andrews, 2002). After all, true cultural studies articulating is hard, surprising, and modest (Grossberg, 2006). However, my analysis demonstrates an attempt to work with these theories – adjusting them, extending them, combining them, problematizing

them, as I see deem necessary – in order to bring me closer to an empirically-grounded understanding of my site of analysis.

In remembering that articulations only emerge at certain moments under certain conditions, I must acknowledge that my articulation of sneaker customization only makes sense temporarily for this moment in this context. As Stuart Hall (1986) argues, articulated linkages are not necessary, determined, absolute, or essential for all time and that “no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated” (Hall, 1980; p. 29). Nonetheless, articulating linkages is at the core of cultural studies’ radically-contextualist approach that posits context as a worthwhile analysis in and of itself. This context is not something that is discovered or extracted, however. It is actively constituted by the researcher through articulation. As Slack (1996) states, “the context is not something out there, within which practices occur or which influence the development of practices. Rather, identities, practices, and effects generally, constitute the very context within which they are practices, identities or effects” (p. 126).

### 3.5 Reflexivity

Reflexivity broadly refers to the process of constant, on-going self-evaluation during the research process. As Pringle and Thorpe (2017) argue, social researchers must examine the link between their subjectivities, life experiences, and theoretical assumptions and interrogate the ways in which it affects their research practice. This is especially necessary when working with a postmodern, subjectivist epistemology that acknowledges the researcher as a co-constructor of knowledge. Guillemen and Gillam (2004) argue that researchers must constantly evaluate their actions and role within

research with the same critical scrutiny that they evaluate their data. Reflexivity is not just a practice of self-romanticizing or vanity, but is crucial to improving the rigor and quality of a researcher's work (Guillemen & Gillam, 2004).

I approached this project as a relatively young, African-American male who has experience customizing sneakers. Despite my critiques of it, I am an active participant in consumer culture that, to some extent, has been interpellated by and internalized the encoded articulation of sneakers, style, race, and identity. I have never been a “sneakerhead”, and I know very little about sneakers and sneaker culture. However, by way of appearance and demographic, I would presume that I looked like I would “fit in” to sneaker culture. Because of this, I believe I had an easier time interacting and conversing with participants who are a part of sneaker culture than would someone who is perceived to be an outsider based on appearance. It seemed as if many of my participants viewed me as a contemporary, and therefore felt comfortable using their vernacular with me. I believe the interviews were conducted with comfortability and an unanticipated level of casualness, as participants were confident that I could speak their language (so to speak). Because of this, I believe my participants spoke more openly, and at times informally (using profanity, colloquial terms, and other phrases that they did not feel the need to explain to me). Especially when speaking about race, I believe that my appearance made African-American participants feel comfortable to make certain critiques that they may not have felt comfortable saying to non-black researcher. Being a male researcher also most likely played a role in participant responses. The thirteen male participants may have spoken to me in a certain manner than they would not have to a female researcher. Additionally, my gender may have affected the interviews with the

two female participants. Though I cannot speculate on the specific ways in which the gender divide may have manifested, it should be noted that the interviews with the two female participants were the two shortest interviews of my sample, and the two women were among the more reserved and less loquacious of the participants<sup>20</sup>. Overall though – male or female – it seemed as if participants viewed me as part of The Culture<sup>21</sup>, and therefore shaped their responses to me as such.

However, because I approached this as someone with years of experiencing customizing sneakers to construct and express my identity, I may be reading meanings and motivations into participants in a different manner than a researcher approaching the topic with no prior experience. I also harbor a critical outlook on society, coupled with progressive political commitments and, quite honestly, a strong motivation (and slight pressure) to write an empirically-rich thesis that will make some contribution to my academic area of study. Despite my efforts to combat them, these factors may have subconsciously affected the ways in which I interpret participant responses and frame them in my analysis.

Furthermore, while I am starting with the empirical and analyzing inductively, I may have been implicitly guided by some of the theoretical frameworks that I considered useful in making sense of my phenomenon. I believe the benefit of my pre-emptive inclusion of these frameworks outweighed the costs. While the frameworks may have implicitly or subconsciously guided how I interpreted participant responses, I would be

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<sup>20</sup> I cannot draw any conclusions from two cases, but I do not believe this increased reservation was a product of a lack of comfortability talking to a man. Rather, in hindsight, I find it more likely that my gender shaped the framing of the questions that I asked and the areas of interest of the overall project. In other words, the topics I was interested in (individuality vs conformity, industry representation of black *masculinity*, and other issues discussed later) may just be more applicable to and significant for men than women. Therefore, women may have just had less to say about these topics.

<sup>21</sup> An elusive, constructed entity that I define in-depth during my empirical analysis.

doomed when attempting to construct themes and patterns of the data if I had nothing to help me in framing my thinking. In a true postmodern sense, without guidance from theoretical frameworks, I may just be left with random, disparate, contradictory and irrational partial truths and fluid knowledges that could not make for a coherent research analysis. While my results somewhat reflect this messiness anyways, my theoretical frameworks at least helped me in attempting to understand the derivations, affects, and intersections of these meanings, lifestyles, and identities.

### 3.6 Representation

While acknowledging that representing the voice of my participants in a non-problematic manner is important, I chose to represent their voice through traditional written analysis. I include direct quotes in order to let participants speak for themselves, but they inevitably were still filtered through my power as a researcher to frame participant voices, choose which quotes and discussions to include and exclude, and assign more significance to certain quotes and positions over others. I weave between participant quotes and analysis. Participant quotes are only lightly edited for style and flow, but participants' words and phrases are kept true to transcription in order to best retain participant tone and vernacular. Vulgarity from participants is included in order to qualify points with the strength that participants may have intended. Any colloquialisms are briefly explained only if they are relevant to the analysis. At times, participant quotes are holistic enough to stand alone, while at other times, the quotes only allude to a point that I make with follow-up analysis. At times throughout my analysis, I lump quotes together that I believe express a similar idea, and then analyze them as a patterned whole.

Theoretical analysis is always important to ascribe to participant quotes, but I am careful not to over-analyze quotes to the extent that I distort the point a participant is trying to make, or reading deeper into a certain concept than a participant intended.

While I would prefer a more reciprocal means of representing voice, one of the costs of my method of thematic analysis is that my subjectivity is implicitly embedded throughout the project and has more power than the subjectivities of my participants. However, I believe the benefits of thematic analysis outweigh the costs. The alternative would be to adjust the focus of the project to focusing only on the meanings that participants attach to shoes. If this were the case, participant voice alone would generally be sufficient in explaining their meanings, reasonings, and experiences. However, I articulated these meanings to the broader social forces that influence it, which participants were not able to explicitly do by themselves because of the hidden nature in which power and social forces operate. Therefore, I chose to retain the power to code, ascribe significance, and theorize at the expense of authentic participant representation because I believe it is this articulation that makes this project meaningful.

### 3.7 Evaluative Criteria

Having criteria for evaluating the quality of one's research is crucial to qualitative research. Qualitative, anti-positivist, constructivist research rejects the traditional standards of quality – mainly validity, reliability, and generalizability – that are often applied to quantitative and positivist research, due to conflicting ontological and epistemological positionings. In fact, criteria for qualitative research in and of itself is controversial. Similar to knowledge and reality, constructivism and relativism sees

criteria not as “truth” but as flexible, contextual, and prone to perpetual uncertainty and imperfection (Burke, 2016; Sparkes & Smith, 2009). There lacks a consensus upon the specific evaluative goals that differing qualitative methodologies should strive for, but rigorous research is still an emphasis for qualitative research (despite its critics that accuse qualitative methodologies as being “anything goes”) (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). As Saukko (2003) states, having multiple criteria for qualitative research does not mean that there are no rules, but it means that “rather than one universal rule that applies everywhere there are different rules, and we need to be aware of how they make us relate to reality differently” (p. 19). While acknowledging that no qualitative criteria can produce completely valid and authentic results, it can still be used as a starting point for planning out one’s methodology (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). I evaluated my project based on Saukko’s (2003) three validities: dialogical validity, deconstructive validity, and contextual validity.

Dialogical validity refers to the extent to which research truthfully captures the lived worlds of the subjects under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; cited in Saukko, 2003). Among the emphases of dialogical validity is truthfulness (how well it does justice to the perspectives of subjects), self-reflexivity (how aware researchers are of personal, social, and political forces that influence their perceptions of reality), and polyvocality (how well research includes multiple voices and perspectives experienced during research) (Saukko, 2003).

Deconstructive validity refers to how well research “manages to unravel social tropes and discourses that, over time, have come to pass for a ‘truth’ about the world” (Saukko, 2003; p. 20). Examples of this process are conducting a Foucauldian genealogy



(Foucault, 1984) or a Derridian deconstruction (1976). However, the strategy I invoked draws from Baudrillard's (1980) notion of "excess" of discourse that produces a potentially infinite number of truths and realities. Therefore, research should highlight the multiple perceptions of reality and ways of understanding a particular phenomenon in order to destabilize any fixed notion of it.

Contextual validity refers to "the capability of research to locate the phenomenon it is studying within the wider social, political, [historical]...context" (Saukko, 2003; p. 21). This evaluative criterion clearly works in tandem with the cultural studies tradition of radical contextualism and articulation. In keeping true to my postmodern/poststructural paradigm, the contextualization is not asserted as the single, fixed, universal truth of a phenomenon, but is derived from a research process that "listen[s] to multiple voices and [challenges] authoritative discourse" (Saukko, 2003, p. 21) in the pursuit of uncovering the hidden operations of power that produce the phenomenon. I believe that my project adequately fulfills all three evaluative criteria.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Empirical Analysis

### 4.1 Introduction

Before providing my analysis, I must describe the setting in which my conversations with sneaker customizers occurred that, in and of itself, is an empirical data point worthy of explication. The two sneaker conventions at which I met the majority of my participants had an unexpected dual purpose for me. I anticipated the conventions would be a useful place to find sneaker customizers, but the extent to which the conventions acclimated me to sneaker culture and prepared me for the upcoming interactions was pure serendipity. The scene that I observed at each provided me with insight into some of the implicit dynamics of sneaker culture – such as who it attempted to appeal to, the ways in which it did so, and how it understood its history, its present, and its future – that could not be articulated through interviews. An atmosphere was created that, to an outsider like me, felt like a tenuous combination of my experiences at a local, inner-city basketball court, and Nike’s commercial attempt to portray that same scene.

#### *4.1.1 Setting the Scene*

The first convention was held at a local art center on the outskirts of a major U.S. city. It was my first time in the section of the city, and it seemed to be underserved compared to other parts of the city, yet also on the verge of gentrification. Before entering the building, I had to weave my way through the people admiring the graffiti-based art that covered the exterior, while they enjoyed an alcoholic beverage from the portable drink truck that was parked immediately outside the entrance. After being forced

to throw away the coffee I had just bought<sup>22</sup> I was directed through a recently-debuted Negro Leagues baseball exhibit to the room where the convention was being held. I felt the convention through my feet before I saw it with my eyes. This was due to the heavy bass that was emanating from the live DJ's speakers, who was playing hip-hop music so loud that every conversation that occurred had to be screamed. Most songs were contemporary hits, but the DJ was always encouraging guests to peruse through the vast collection of vinyl records from the 1980s-1990s hip-hop era that was displayed in front of his table. He occupied one corner; in the opposite corner was a large flat screen television on which guests could play "NBA Street", a popular early-2000s video game that consists of NBA stars playing on outdoor blacktop courts with chain nets and ubiquitous showboating and trash-talking. From the game's product description currently on Amazon (retrieved March, 2019): "Lace up the 'tops and hoop it up... Experience the game of streetball, become part of the culture and develop into the ultimate street legend... From inner-city blacktop showdowns to sun-soaked b-ball brawls by the beach, these are the toughest and hippest courts in the country." More than just explaining the game, this description also alluded to what the sneaker convention as a whole was trying to create. Adding to the aura was the dim lighting of the room, yet still bright enough so that the graffiti murals on each wall were focal points. The hyperreal simulacrum of "original" hip-hop culture, late-'80s nostalgia, and expressive black masculinity was in full effect.

There were about 25 vendors with tables set up to display their products scattered throughout the room. The vendors consisted of: collectors (who sell sneakers from their

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<sup>22</sup> There was a strict no-drinks-allowed-inside policy, in order to protect all the newly-unboxed and vulnerable sneakers.

collection), artists (who sell artwork on various canvases, often related to sneakers or fashion), and sellers (who were there to sell sneakers, apparel, and products of their own brand), and re-sellers (who buy exclusive shoes at their release and re-sell them at a higher price). Throughout the event, the vendors would move between sitting behind their tables, presenting their sales pitch, negotiating prices, bartering products, and snapping pictures and videos for social media. Guests wandered around, sometimes aimlessly and sometimes in keen pursuit of a certain vendor or sneaker to buy from (and in some cases, sell to). Guests were mostly male, and ranged in age from teenagers to about late-40s. The racial breakdown of guests and vendors was similar: majority-black, with the rest made up of about an equal amount of white, Asian, and Hispanic individuals. Most guests wore either sporting apparel (most commonly, a basketball jersey from the '90s) or something in accordance with latest fashion trends (most commonly, as I observed and was told, brands such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Off-White, and Bathing Ape to name a few). In this context, though, clothing was periphery. Everyone was looking down, at the primary source of social currency: the sneakers. Everyone in the room was wearing their most attention-worthy sneaker, whether they aimed for recognition through vibrant originality or strict adherence to the latest style. Even I had on a pair that I customized online through miAdidas, which I felt was vital in establishing rapport and credibility with my subjects.

The second sneaker convention I attended had a setup that resembled the first, even though it was held at a large convention center in the downtown area of the same city. Whereas the first sneaker convention occupied the entirety of the art center, the second sneaker convention was just one of many activities going on in the convention

center on that day. Because of this, there was no art on the walls or superfluous gimmicks, but there was still a DJ playing loud hip-hop music in a large room surrounded by business conference rooms. The atmosphere was still strikingly similar, despite the event being much bigger than the first, with twice as many vendors and guests. There were a few notable differences, however. First, there were significantly more women at the second one, both as vendors and guests. Second, there was a visible portion of guests, mainly white teenagers accompanied by their parents, who were there solely to sell their shoes to the vendors<sup>23</sup>. Despite these differences, my experience and the conversations I had with people were roughly the same as the first. It is in these contexts that most of my interviews took place. While I gave participants the option to interview at a later time and place, it was both my and their preference to do it in the midst of the action: screaming into each other's ears over the blaring music while constantly surveying the latest sneakers throughout the room.

#### *4.1.2 Framing my Analysis*

I learned quickly that the three most prevalent methods of sneaker customization are *individual* customization (painting/drawing/airbrushing on one's own sneakers), *professional* customization (sending one's sneakers to a street-level professional customizer to add designs and artwork to), and *industry* customization (creating new sneakers online through industry websites such as NikeID, miAdidas, Under Armour 'Icon', etc). I naively approached this project believing that industry customization was the most common method. I soon realized that individual and professional on the street

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<sup>23</sup> More on this later in the chapter.

level was not only much more common, but was more respected within sneaker culture and has been around much longer than industry customization. In fact, many in sneaker culture conceptualize the word “customization” to primarily mean street customization as opposed to industry customization. Many people I talked to did not even consider the online, industry method as customization until I told them what I was referring to. In the following discussion, I analyze all three methods. They are not the same, although, for ease, I lump them together when I say “customization.” Nonetheless, throughout the analysis, I examine the distinct meanings, significations, and practices of consumption of each method, as well as the dynamics between the three.

I began the project aiming to answer four central questions: 1) how do individuals understand sneaker customization, and why do they engage in it? 2) what symbolic meanings do individuals attach to the process and products of sneaker customization? 3) in what ways has sneaker customization influenced consumer identities, attitudes, and behaviors? and 4) to what extent is sneaker customization an expression of consumer agency in response to, in spite of, or in accordance with its broader cultural, economic, political, and ideological contexts?

In general, participants were able to provide substantive answers for the first two questions, as they were mostly able to explain why they customized, what customization means to them, and the reasons they customized their sneakers in a specific manner. In answering this question, I was able to rely mostly on semantic interpretation. These first section of this analysis is dedicated to answering these questions.

The last two questions were more difficult to answer. The third question required a certain level of introspection that participants had at best, rarely thought about, and at

worst, were uncomfortable discussing. The fourth question, of course, required a level of contextual mapping that was unrealistic to expect out of participants in an interview. In answering questions three and four, I had to rely heavily on latent interpretations to understand how individuals gave meaning to customized sneakers. However, participants were surprisingly animated when discussing their frustrations with and critiques of the sneaker industry and the current state of sneaker culture. Although they were not necessarily within the scope of my interest to begin the project, these critiques were too interesting to leave out of my analysis. The second section of this analysis draws on the themes of the first section to incorporate these discussions, focusing on the role of sneaker customization in the cultural and political tensions between sneaker consumers, sneaker customizers, and the sneaker industry.

#### *4.1.3 Analysis Overview*

This analysis is divided into two sections, each of which has four themes. The first section responds primarily to my first two research questions, explaining the meanings of sneaker customization and their association with individual and group identity. As I will demonstrate, participants generally viewed customized sneakers either as an avenue for expressing individuality or an expedited way to conform to latest cultural trends. In addition, participants perceived customized sneakers as an affective material of pride and status, an artistic endeavor, an entrepreneurial endeavor, a philanthropic endeavor, and as a means to signal group identity.

The second section responds primarily to my third and fourth research questions, contextualizing the significance and practices of sneaker customization within the

broader formation of sneaker culture in relation to the sneaker industry<sup>24</sup>. In this section, I explicate the position of sneaker customization within two broader cultural clashes. The first being between ‘purists’ who use customized sneakers the ‘right’ way and ‘hypebeasts’ who use customized sneakers the ‘wrong’ way. This clash is not only a source of contention, but a dynamic that, for participants, is threatening the very existence of sneaker culture. The second clash is between increasingly-conscious, empowered symbolic creators and a profit-driven corporate sneaker industry fighting to stay relevant at any cost. For participants, the lengths to which the sneaker industry prioritizes profit not only risks the loyalty of its original consumers, but reproduces ideologies that actively harm the individuals that the industry pretends to appreciate.

## 4.2 The Meanings of Sneaker Customization

### *4.2.1 A ‘One-of-one’ vs ‘What’s Hot’: Individuality vs Conformity*

By far the most common meaning of customized sneakers for participants was as a way to express their individuality. Many viewed custom sneakers as a mode of distinct self-expression amidst what they perceived as the monotony and homogenization of modern sneaker fashion. Shane summarized the notion best in response to being asked why he chose to customize his sneakers: “Just to stand out. Just to have a one-of-one, a shoe that no one else has.” Having a sneaker that differentiated themselves from their

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<sup>24</sup> Though, for a scholarly analysis, it would more logical to move from the general (context of sneaker customization) to the specific (meanings of sneaker customization), I did the opposite for a few reasons. First, my questions to participants moved from specific to general, so the narrative made more sense in that order. Second, my research questions move from specific to general, which guided my thoughts. Third, and most importantly to me, I believe that a discussion of the processes of sneaker culture needed the context of the meanings of sneaker customization more than the meanings needed the context on sneaker culture. Both require the context of the other, so either order would have been clunky, but I am confident that moving from specific to general makes for the more sensible and naturally-flowing narrative.



peers was important to participants. Echoing the claims made in previous literature on sneakers (Miner, 2009; Turner, 2015, Wilson, 1996), participants expressed their reasons for customizing sneakers in the following pattern:

**Thomas:** They really express who I am as a person... I like to have my shoes pop out just like I like to pop out.

**Brett:** Just a way of expression. [My sneakers] are something I haven't seen before so I decided to make it myself... I was tired of wearing what everyone else was wearing. So I decided to be different for a little bit.

**Ken:** Just to change it up. To be different from everyone else walking around.

**Charles:** Well for the Nike IDs<sup>25</sup>, they're my own thing. They're my own creation. Obviously someone else did it, I didn't do it with my own hand but it's still something unique to my own self. It's something personal and something that nobody else would have. Something that would kinda turn heads.

**Wayne:** I love to wear them. It's a style thing, a pride thing. Like a statement thing. You know, a lot goes into sneakers now. Like it started out as something to protect our feet but now it's just something to represent us. Where we're from and what we aspire to become I guess.

These comments support Sassatelli's (2007) argument that the consumers of late capitalism wield commodities in ways to construct identity through difference, attempting to enhance one's value through the quest for novelty amidst ubiquitous bland normality. Sassatelli argues that "people have increasingly come to ground their humanity in being different from the 'objectivity' of things, that this, they have sought to

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<sup>25</sup> Name of Nike's online customization program.

distinguish themselves from the perceived passivity, docility, and transience of the many objects that surround them” (2007; quoted in Lury, 2011, p. 206). The pursuit of difference as an end in itself was evident and exemplified through the practice of sneaker customization for participants, and will serve as the overarching theme to this analysis. The custom sneaker, first and foremost, signified the individuality of the one who designed and adorned it.

While the pursuit of individuality was the most common theme, all participants acknowledged that *conformity*, or consuming in order to impress others and fit in, was prevalent within sneaker culture. In a postmodern culture that prioritizes difference over similarity (Featherstone, 2007), an antipathy towards conformity is unsurprising. Not all viewed conformity with such pessimism, however. Brett, an individual customizer<sup>26</sup>, could not conceptualize sneaker culture without conformity, stating “I think shoes always start with the self, but the main purpose is for everyone else to admire them. That’s why we do it.” Admiration, for Brett, is the main motivation behind sneaker customization. Similarly, Thomas, an individual and professional customizer, stated that the reception of his custom sneakers from others gave him a form of validation:

I love that look when you’re walking around and you got some heat<sup>27</sup> on your feet and somebody double-takes. If they’re in that culture, they’re gonna look at you and they’re gonna know what it is. Sneakers mean a lot to me.

In this quote, Thomas references the moments when the originality of his sneaker demands the attention of others. The act of seeing people take notice of his shoes gave

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<sup>26</sup> A brief biography of the participant is included when it is relevant to their corresponding comment. See the Sample Characteristics in Appendix B for the pseudonym, gender, age, race, and sneaker customization experience for each participant.

<sup>27</sup> Colloquial term for something “hot”, or noticeably fashionable.

Thomas a sense of gratification, while signaling to others that Thomas was a member of a particular culture. Thomas' comments support Douglas and Isherwood's (1979) view of as communicative to others within groups, along with Baudrillard's (1983) view of consumer goods as external significations. Still, the idea of considering the thoughts or opinions of others was discussed pejoratively among most participants.

Brett and Thomas were the only two willing to admit that the opinions of others played a role in their customizing practice. All other participants stated that they only made sneakers for themselves without regard to how they will be perceived by others; yet, they all believed that *others* within the culture are overly-mindful of what others think. Although, semantically, taking into consideration the thoughts of others on one's shoes was generally stigmatized, even those who stated they only make sneakers for themselves latently expressed that the reception from others was somewhat meaningful. For example, Charles, an individual and industry customizer, stated that "no sneakers I make are for anyone else. They're for myself because I like them. I don't care what the hype is or what others think." This may be partially true, yet he also pointed out that he only tends to wear them at sneaker conventions and other settings in which he thinks they will be appreciated. Similar to Thomas, Charles judged their originality by how much the sneakers "turned heads", as well as the regularity with which people commented that his sneakers were "one-of-ones" that they had not seen before. To Charles, as well as other participants, the originality of their sneakers was judged by the extent to which *others* identified them as original.

For the majority of participants, however, conformity was often positioned as the enemy of originality and a perpetual detriment to the sanctity of sneaker culture. Justin, a professional customizer, stated:

the way the sneaker game is now, a lot of people are just here for show. Here for whatever's hot, or whatever has a label on it or a brand name on it. Like that's all people wanna wear.

Ken, an individual customizer, similarly stated that:

I think everyone really does it for other people to see. I think that's the nature of sneakers. I mean hopefully it expresses a part of you, but you definitely show it off. And the validation comes from the like button on Instagram or Twitter or whatever.

These two comments reflect the admissions of external influence from Thomas and Brett, although Justin and Ken stated them with a tone of condemnation that indicated clear disapproval. This sentiment that some within sneaker culture were only in it “for show” was often paired with negative attitudes towards brands, and those who blindly consume them. Yet it was also acknowledged by some participants that blind consumption of the latest “hot<sup>28</sup>” brand was due to the prevalence of advertising and marketing of that brand. For example, Taylor, an African-American professional customizer, was willing to admit that he previously consumed sneakers in order to fit into what he perceived as his place in society. He stated:

I was raised in the 90s, so that's pretty much when sneaker culture popped off, when larger companies realized that they could, you know, use prolific athletes to

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<sup>28</sup> “Hot” was the term often used by participants, which basically means popular or ubiquitous.

help influence the masses. So, you know, as a young kid not knowing anything about that, I just saw my favorite athletes, like Michael Jordan, playing and wanted those. And my aunt pretty much gave me all my Jordan's. So I kind of, by default, felt like that was a way of life. Like sneakers... it was the way to be fresh<sup>29</sup>. It was the way to be respected. All the ladies and everybody near me was like, "oh he always fresh. He always got the J's [Jordans]." So it was like when you walk through, you feel like it feeds that male ego. Like yeah, I'm the man. Like, you know, like I always got the fresh stuff."

In this case, Taylor discusses the ways in which he was interpellated by the messages emanating from Nike's advertising that, as mentioned earlier, positioned Jordan sneakers as a way to not only 'Be Like Mike', but as an essential symbolic commodity in the construction of a hegemonic black masculinity (Wilson, 1996). Darren, an African-American professional street customizer whose upbringing was similar to Taylor's, also echoed the notion of sneakers being crucial for acceptance into his peer group and, subsequently, a vital object of self-esteem. Darren stated that he:

came up in the inner-city where, you know, having the flyest<sup>30</sup> kicks is part of your day-to-day. If you ain't got on some clean shoes or at least something that, you know, people are notable of, your status level or even your security level – when it comes to insecurity and confidence – it's a little stagnant. You needed them. So shoes have always been a part of my culture.

Though certain groups would be quick to misconstrue the comments of Taylor and Darren as evidence for pathological black consumption habits, their comments more

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<sup>29</sup> Someone is "fresh" if they are updated on the latest trends, and an object is fresh if it is novel.

<sup>30</sup> "Fly" is a colloquial term for stylish

closely reflect Gilroy's (1983) argument that black racial identity is often formulated by a complex attachment to certain brands and styles. Similar to the subversion of elite high culture by the working class, the assembling of these brands and styles by African-Americans can be understood through a race-based application of Willis (1990) as a form of symbolically-creative subversion of a white mainstream by those excluded from it.

The definition of what's 'hot' has always rapidly evolved, but being conscious of the notion was believed to be a cultural necessity for Taylor and Darren. For them, having the popular sneakers was a significant factor in the shaping of consumption habits, navigation of social status, and construction of self-perception. In hindsight, Darren and Taylor, along with the others, realized that it was often a problematic and destructive mindset, yet one that sadly is still far too common today. Cody, a professional customizer, was also critical of the position of sneakers his urban community. Recalling the sneaker killings of the 1990s, Cody pointed out the paradoxical nature of this interpellation and contemplated a solution to changing this mindset for the youth of today. Cody states:

we just need to talk to these kids who are out here risking their lives and their money and going to mommy and daddy taking their money to get these shoes and say "what is it about these shoes that make you want them so bad?" If you don't even know who this person is. Half these kids have never seen Jordan step foot on the court. But they all out here killing and spending thousands of dollars for his shoes. Not even knowing who he is.

Taylor and Darren's accounts were reflective upon adolescence; they both declared strongly that they no longer have a conformist mindset and make and wear shoes without

regard to what others think. Few participants acknowledged they took what's 'hot' into account when customizing shoes, and many participants stated that they created shoes specifically to resist the ubiquitous 'hot' trends. Yet, some participants were more than willing to capitalize on the 'hot' trends with their customizations. Nicole and Amber, both female professional street customizers who create and sell customized shoes as a hobby, stated that they pay close attention to the stylistic shifts in the industry and attempt to have their custom shoes mirror them<sup>31</sup>. As a result, Nicole expressed that she designs shoes that are heavily inspired by the latest 'hot' brands, which she identified in the current moment as Off-White, Gucci, Bathing Ape, and Air Jordan. However, not all professional customizers had such a welcoming attitude towards the 'hot' trends.

Some participants even took small but significant personal action to combat what they perceived to be the incentivization of conformity. Paul, a high-profile professional street customizer, took a stance by denying any customization requests that were related in some way to the latest 'hot' brands. Tracing the shifts of sneaker customization over the past decade, Paul stated that previously people wanted to work with him to create something brand new. Now, people increasingly want him to create copies of what they've seen others wearing. He argues:

the custom shoe game has been butchered into something that's not so custom anymore. The word custom – making something unique to the individual – has been lost. Now, there's a lot of "I like this, can you make it for me?" Or "I saw this guy do this, can you do it too?" It's just a lot of conformity.

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<sup>31</sup> Though two women is not large enough of a data point to draw a conclusion from, it seemed as if pursuing individuality and avoiding conformity was not as crucial for the women as it was for the majority of the men in my sample.

Paul said that unless there's some sort of artistic or original twist to it, he turns down requests that he views as mimicry, despite losing a considerable amount of business for having this approach. He argued that it is necessary though, in order to stay true to what his business' stated mission and his vision of what should be at the foundation of sneaker culture: what he calls "true customs... one of ones, pieces of art." For Paul, signifying individuality and upholding sanctity was worth the potential loss of business.

Paul took his critique even further, extending it not just to sneaker consumers but to his fellow street-level customizers. He argued that it was not just that consumers that follow the latest 'hot' trends, but the very act of customizing shoes has *itself* become a 'hot' trend that he sees everyone flocking to. Paul noticed a slow evolution that resulted in a contemporary sneaker culture in which the design or the meaning of the custom sneaker was not the primary component. The fact that a sneaker was a custom, and people acknowledged it as so, was enough. It was not so much that consumers customized certain designs to be signifiers of some part of their identity; the fact that the shoe was a custom was its own signifier, regardless of how it looked. Somewhere along the way, according to Paul, the various sneaker blogs and magazines<sup>32</sup> that derided the trend of customization as detrimental to sneaker culture reversed course. At some point, they abandoned their disdain and began to use custom sneakers as a source of viral content for increased clicks and subscriptions. Paul viewed this transition as the impetus not only to everyone wanting customized sneakers, but a plethora of people thinking that they can create customized shoes to sell. He states:

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<sup>32</sup> Paul did not specifically name any blogs or magazines.



You know, when I first started... everything that was being put out was really a one of one. But then, it just became a fad. It became where every Tom, Dick and Harry was a customizer. As long as you own the airbrush or some markers or some paint, you're a customer now.

Whereas once, only 'true' artists and professionals were providing high-quality customs at the street level, Paul perceived the market as currently being diluted by those who customize just to make "a quick buck" through trendy designs. Paul concludes: "This used to be a way to get something outside of the norm. And now, it's almost become a way to fall in line with what everybody else is doing."

Even if customization has, in some ways, provided a tool to cultivate individuality in response to what participants view as the mundane conformity of sneaker consumption, in other ways, customization has only exacerbated the problem. However, customization utilized in the pursuit of both individuality and conformity involved an "active process of conscious, purposeful image-making" (Willis, 1990; p. 89). Whether it was an identity through difference or an identity through similarity, customization was a method for participants to consciously construct this image. As Simmel (1957) argues, both individuality and conformity are needed in such a complex consumer society. Commodities, for Simmel, were a key resource used in the "compromise between adherence and absorption in a social group and the need for individuation and distinction from the members of such groups" (quoted in Miles, 1998; p. 20). Although discussed by participants as if the two were in tension, a balance of individuality and conformity are an inescapable necessity among the complexities of late capitalism.

#### 4.2.2 *'I Finally Got 'Em': Customized Sneaker as an Affective Commodity*

Sneaker customization was not always utilized by participants as a rational calculation in pursuit of a predetermined end. In many cases, the emotional, affective elements of custom sneakers were enough of a reason and justification for their creation and adornment. Ideologies and the pursuit of identity certainly shaped the significations of sneakers and customizations, but the affective implications, as Andrews (1998) writes, “[bridged] the gap between ideology and everyday existence” for participants. Willis (1990) found that clothing felt differently for individuals in certain contexts, and that individuals manipulated their clothing styles to “produce the right effect, to induce the right feeling or mood, involving subtle dressing strategies and choices of colours or styles” (p. 89). Customized sneakers were used in this way. While participants said they were not always able to put their feelings towards wearing custom sneakers into words, some of the descriptive phrases used included:

**Charles:** They just feel great.

**Shane:** It’s spectacular... it feels amazing.

**Wayne:** It’s a style, a pride thing.

**Darren:** It’s a statement, like it gives you a sense of confidence that you might not have without them.

Steven, an individual and professional customizer, stated that emotions are what drive his creative process of customizing shoes: “All the shoes that I customized came out of emotions. I would use them to represent me or what I’m going through at a certain time.” Paul stated that even the act of customizing sneakers evoked certain indescribable feelings, and said that he “fell in love” with each pair of sneakers he made for others,

though he later said that sneakers have become an addiction. Shane also said that the feelings that sneakers create for him has made his hobby develop into an almost unhealthy insatiability, stating:

I don't even know if I would call [sneakers] a hobby now. It's more like an obsession. Because even with buying a brand-new shoe, the hunger is not done, the hunger is not complete. I'm still looking for some new kicks<sup>33</sup> right away.

Shane's comments support Campbell's (1994) argument that commodities cannot satisfy needs because consumers desire the emotional stimuli that commodities produce rather than the commodities themselves. Though customizing sometimes made it more impossible to quell insatiable need to possess every possible style or design, it also served as an outlet for this managing emotion. Participants alluded to three specific feelings that customized sneakers evoked: the feelings of self-affirmation, nostalgia, customizing as a therapeutic practice.

The first, and one of the more surprising, feelings that sneaker evoked for participants was one of self-affirmation. For many participants, both traditional and custom sneakers served as a signifier of achievement; as if it was the material manifestation of individual progress in the face of adversity. Especially for lower-to-working class black participants, sneakers represented the transcendence of the limitations of their upbringing. For these participants, the ability to buy and wear the sneakers that they coveted – but could not afford – during childhood affirmed to them that they, in some capacity, have achieved success in later life. This pattern can be expressed in participants' own words:

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<sup>33</sup> Colloquial term for sneakers.

**Shane:** As a kid, my parents didn't really have money, couldn't really afford like all the best sneakers, so I kinda made it my business that, you know, when I got my first job ever, I was gonna put myself in a position to never wear shoes that I gotta get from somebody else or shoes that have a hole in them or something like that. I made it my business to make sure I never wear the same pair of shoes, every day. So now I have over 100 plus, and of course that's not enough for the whole year, but I have 100 plus options then, opposed to being 15 or 14 years old and having one pair.

**Cody:** When I was a little kid. I couldn't get the name brands. I wasn't allowed to. It cost too much... you know, the typical parents stuff. So when I was able to get my first pair of Nike's, it meant something. So then once you start to learn about it and you learn the whole lifestyle about it... as you grow and get older, it just becomes a part of you.

**Wayne:** For me, [sneakers] are also very personal. I grew up not having a lot, so now that I'm able to buy a pair of shoes or 2 or 3 for a couple hundred dollars, and make that money back and be able to spend again... it's like an art. It's entrepreneurship.

**Amber:** If [the sneakers] are some that I've wanted since I was a kid, it makes me feel like "I finally got em." You just want to cherish them.

Sneakers were, in a way, an emblem of the American Dream. The participants listed above were referring to the traditional sneakers that their peers growing up would wear. For other participants, customization was used as a way to mimic the traditional sneakers that they could not afford. As Brett states: "If I didn't have the money to buy the shoes I

liked, I would spend all of my time drawing them and adding my own details to the concepts.” For Brett, customization filled the gap between what he could afford and what others had. Similarly, Nicole stated: “I remember when I was younger, I always wanted to have a lot of shoes but I couldn’t get them because I couldn’t afford them. But now sell to buy what I need, or customize what I want.” Even currently, Nicole uses customization as a way to have the designs she likes without having to pay high prices for them.

This pattern suggests that sneakers are used not only to signal identity to others, but to construct it within oneself, signifying to one’s own psyche that they have reached a desired level of success. Just as Douglas and Isherwood (1979) suggested about the “communicative” nature of commodities, custom sneakers were a commodity used to communicate meanings both internal and external to the self. However, out of these responses emerges deeper questions, such as: why were sneakers chosen as a demonstrator of achievement over other objects? For what reason does achievement need to be demonstrated through consumption at all? Is it more to reassure one’s self or to signal achievement to others?

Participants responses suggest that a lack of conforming to dominant cultural consumption trends of one’s socioeconomic group – in this case, lower-to-working classes and predominantly African-Americans – was not always a statement of individuality. In some cases, the reason people did not have the latest trendy sneakers was just a lack of means. Overall though, these responses indicate that there was still an ideological imperative in place that individuals should strive to obtain sneakers that their peers had, however long it took. This notion of inclusion into a group through emulative consumption (Veblen, 1926) is certainly derived from the discursive positioning of those

who had certain sneakers as the pinnacle of a cultural group. Akin to Douglas & Isherwood's (1979) argument, sneaker possession, in this case, was a signifier of social status within their group. While it may be beneficial to individuals' self-esteem to finally be able to consume like their peers, it is a result of fashion/apparel industry sign-manipulation that consumption of certain high-priced goods was the avenue through which individuals could prove to themselves and others that they were "successful."

Although the above responses allude to childhood as a time to overcome, sneakers also exemplified the rosier, more positive aspects of childhood. Nostalgia was a feeling that arose from sneakers, and also became manifest in certain customizations. Having the ability to buy sneakers that were popular during participants' childhoods (most commonly the late-1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s) were representative of simpler times. Adding upon the pattern of self-affirmation, Ken, an individual customizer, stated that:

[Buying sneakers] started off as aspirational. Because when I was younger, I couldn't get all the shoes that I wanted. So it's like, you get to a certain level of success when you get older and it's kinda aspirational and nostalgic. Because now I can go back and buy all those shoes that I couldn't get when I was younger.

For Ken, buying the sneakers that he could not afford during childhood was not an act of "catching up", but was an enjoyable way to remember the past.

Participants also drew upon nostalgia when customizing their sneakers. A common way to do this was to embed sneakers with cartoons from childhood, either to wear and gain recognition or as a way to stimulate sales. The four participants who engaged in this practice (Justin, Steven, Amber, and Charles) indicated that the designs were meant to spark nostalgia not only for themselves, but for others who grew up in the

era in which that cartoon was prominent. Amber customized her sneakers with designs from the popular 2000s-era cartoons *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *The Boondocks* in order to sell them to fellow consumers her age. Many of Justin's sneakers included prominent black and Latino cartoons from the time that he was growing up. For Justin, this was important because it gave today's black and Latino youth a form of representation to identify with. Steven also sold sneakers with cartoon designs, stating that his designs "gave that emotion off... everyone who knows that cartoon, they know what it was and they feel that feeling." For these participants, designs inspired by popular cartoons were meant to create a bond with others through shared nostalgia.

Cartoons were not the only signifiers of an earlier time period that were added to sneakers. Cody and Ken both recognized the inclusion of hip-hop designs as an evocative commemoration of the era when that music was released. For example, Ken added a Wu Tang ice cream cone, a famous symbol of the popular early 1990s rap group Wu Tang Clan, to one of his sneakers. Ken said that others would routinely see the shoes and tell him that they remembered that era when Wu Tang was popular, which validated the shoes for Ken. Similarly, Cody stated that a pair of Nike's with a designs reminiscent of Kanye West's 2004 album *College Dropout* made him think of his love for that album for caused him to reflect upon how much life has changed since that time. Although largely benign, this pattern demonstrates that the ideological association between hip-hop and sneakers that began with Adidas and Run DMC in the 1980s (Turner, 2015) is still apparent today.

The act of wearing and/or customizing sneakers was also described as therapeutic by participants, in a number of ways. Steven, as outlined earlier, stated that he

customized sneakers in a way that represented his emotions and what he was going through at the time that he made them. Thomas, referring to the act of customizing sneakers, said “it helps me feel free as a person, and it relieves stress and gets me in my zone. It’s like a form of meditation.” It was not the sneakers themselves, but the act of customizing that was a stress reliever for Thomas. For Brett, customizing shoes by hand with paint was preferred to online industry customization because the experience of working on a sneaker and seeing the process from start to finish was therapeutic. As will be described with more depth later, multiple participants said that they thought the process of customizing was therapeutic especially for disadvantaged inner-city youth. Darren viewed an interest in sneaker culture and fashion consumption as a way for inner-city youth to process, organize, and express their raw emotions in what he called a productive way. Wayne said that his passion for customizing sneakers kept him out of trouble, and serves as a way to “get a lot of kids off the street” to this day. This lends support to Lee’s (1993) point about late capitalism’s increasing emphasis on the experience of consuming rather than the materiality of what is consumed, as the experience of customizing had affective implications for participants regardless of what the final product became.

#### 4.2.3 ‘True Artistry’ vs ‘A Quick Buck’: Art vs Business

The use of sneakers as an artistic outlet and the use of sneakers as a business venture were two commonly-discussed uses of customization by participants. For some participants, these two uses worked in tandem. For others, the two were dichotomous; the belief being that customization was *either* true artistry *or* a means to make money.



Participants who believed art and business could co-exist often viewed custom sneakers as pieces of art, that could be also be bought, sold, and overall reduced to their economic value. This view is based in the reality of late capitalism, which, as Mandel (1978) and Jameson (1991) suggest, is defined by the commodification of cultural endeavors and institutions. Most of these participants came from artistic backgrounds, and applied that experience to sneakers either as a causal hobby or, for the ones driven by the tendencies of late capitalism, as a way to sell sneakers and make money.

For participants who viewed artistry and business as dichotomous, there was a sense that the commodification of customized sneakers was prompting a collective decrease in the quality and originality of the art produced. This view was even shared by those who themselves customized and sold sneakers. While it was widely acknowledged that it was acceptable to sell sneakers, participants shared Jameson's (1991) pessimism towards cultural commodification, positioning sneaker customization as an endeavor that should be about the pursuit of true artistry first, and profit second. This view was even shared by participants who themselves customized sneakers and sold them. Most of these professional customizers rationalized this paradox by arguing that they customized for the art first and the money second, but accused *other* professional customizers as only being concerned about the money first and the business second. As a result of focusing on money rather than artistry, participants said that other customizers only catered to what's 'hot' instead of seeking originality. The hierarchizing of profit over artistry, then, was seen as the incentive for conformity and responsible for the dilution of sneaker culture. Overall, there was a subtle tension between artistry and business that I will outline in the following paragraphs.

Many participants identified sneaker customization as a form of art, and as an extension, those who customized sneakers as artists. Three participants described their sneakers as a blank canvas to be shaped, decorated, and enhanced as they saw fit. Charles viewed customization as an artistic expression that was not only a challenging and exciting experience, but was unique in that the artist can wear and show off the finished product throughout their entire day. Charles's comments place sneakers as an example of Featherstone's (2007) aestheticization of everyday life, in which individuals apply style and flare to items that have traditionally lacked distinguishable qualities. Wayne also viewed custom sneakers as a form of art that was distinctively enmeshed with the identity of the artist. Wayne stated:

You can't separate sneakers from art. It's not any different from taking a canvas and painting your ideas and writing a message on it or making a statement. It's the same thing with shoes. It's just now, it goes beyond protecting our feet, it's part of our outfits and part of who we are.

Wayne's comments indicate, in plain language, the transcendence of sign-value over use-value with sneakers (Baudrillard, 1983). For Wayne, individuals aestheticize their sneakers in a playful and eccentric fashion in order to signify their identity (Featherstone, 2007). Cody described the joy of the experience of customizing sneakers as:

just being able to take a blank canvas and do whatever you want with it, it's the same thing with shoes but just a three-dimensional form. So to be able to have your moment of freedom to do what the other designers did and just see what you can create, it's pretty dope. It's a different medium for art, it's beautiful.

Just as the experience is a greater emphasis in postmodern culture (Featherstone, 2007; Lee, 1993), participants indicated that the final product was not the sole focus. The process in which they did so also shaped the meaning of the final product. Most participants who referred to their sneakers as artwork were ones who designed them by hand, but even Charles, who customized his shoes online through industry websites, viewed his creations as a form of art. Charles even tried to use industry websites to express artwork that he enjoyed. He attempted to put his favorite painting, *The Scream* by Edvard Munch, on a pair of Vans, but was refused due to copyright infringement issues. Other participant methods of artwork on their shoes included painting, drawing, airbrushing, stenciling, dip-dyeing, writing, and switching up laces to create different patterns.

Engaging in the practice of sneaker customization was a natural development from previous skill, talent, or experience in art. Most participants who sold sneakers viewed them as a way to capitalize on their artistic prowess onto a medium that was more popular and visible than traditional artistic mediums. Steven began customizing because he was a skilled artist growing up and loved sneakers, so he recently switched from doing tattoo work to customizing sneakers full-time. Thomas also had a talent for art growing up and works as a tattoo artist. After winning a state-wide art contest and being pressured from his peers to customize shoes, Thomas began to customize part-time. Amber viewed sneaker customization as an artistic expression that “just came easy to me because I’ve always been able to draw.” Nicole majored in graphic design in college and had experience with photography and drawing. She started customizing because “I wanted to just try it because I saw a lot of people doing it and I wanted to try my hand in it. And it

also was another way for me to make some money.” Justin’s story involved a higher level of investment in sneaker art, as he attended a prominent art school in California with the intent of becoming a sneaker designer. After an internship with Nike or Adidas in Oregon did not pan out, he returned to the East Coast and started his own art business that included customized sneakers. He stated that even his non-sneaker products that he designs have “always been dripped in the culture around sneakers.” Customizers then, in their creation and popularization of symbolic goods of customized sneakers, can be understood as cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984) as they use this commodification of culture as a means to exemplify distinction for themselves and their clients.

Not all professional customizers came alike though, according to participants. Paul, following up on his complaint about “every Tom, Dick, and Harry with an airbrush” was a customizer now, said that true artistry was what separated the “real” customizers from the “fake” customizers. When asked what separates him from the other professional customizers he complains about, Paul said:

Well you're dealing with an artist, a real true artist with 30 years' worth the airbrushing experience under their belt. You know, someone that's been doing it before it was a fad and someone that is passionate about it... there's a lot of things that we can do that other artists just simply can't. Like these people who call themselves customizers, there's some things we can pull off or they can't, or even that they wouldn't even dare to try.

For Paul, it was his skill, experience, and quality of his artwork that made him a true professional customizer. Paul is not being conceited with this comment. His sneaker customization business is globally-renowned, and he has customized sneakers for various

professional athletes and celebrities<sup>34</sup>. Paul's comments come from a position of respect within the sneaker customization field, but his sentiment was also shared by those without Paul's level of success. Justin agreed that certain customizers' skillset is only bound to the latest trends. "If you go on Instagram right now and any artist," Justin said, "I guarantee you whatever the trending topic is on Instagram right now, that's what their [sneaker] sketches will look like." Cody, another professional customizer, also pointed to passion as what makes him distinct, saying: "I'm not looking to make a crazy company just off customizing sneakers. It's just a close passion of mine, being an artist. I just love doing it every day, morning or night." Those customizers who declared that they had passion were wary of sneakers that looked passionless, which they often viewed as coming from people with superficial art skills. Customizers who made "passionless" shoes were diagnosed by participants as conforming to the latest trends, only interested in money, or both. According to these participants, passionless sneaker customization has increased in the past few years to the detriment of sneaker culture. For these participants, the gross commodification of customization was the impetus for what Jameson (1991) termed a descent into "depthlessness."

Participants also viewed true artistry as the reason to consume on the street level<sup>35</sup> instead of through the industry. Many participants thought that industry sneakers followed a similar formula based on the latest trends (more on this later). On the other hand, street customizers that were *truly* artists (as in, not just following the money) were viewed as more capable of transcending and innovating these monotonous designs. Justin, speaking about that industry formula based on trendiness, said "I'm not about to

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<sup>34</sup> Paul was the participant who I contacted after he was recommended by multiple previous participants.

<sup>35</sup> As in, from other collectors or customizers from common culture.

conform to that. I do what I want. I draw or I create what I feel. What people say is popping or what's trending at the time, I don't feel like that's real art." Paul agreed with Justin, and considered the quality of his art to be so renowned that he no longer viewed the industry as a factor in his business. Paul states: "My niche is carved out. What [Nike] does doesn't affect me, because they're not gonna find an artist like me. I don't really worry because I can create... People come to me to get something that Nike can't mass produce." Paul offered the hypothetical example of a Martin Luther King Jr. tribute design for a custom sneaker. If the industry or lower-skilled street customizers were to make that shoe, Paul claimed that they would only add some words from King's "I Have a Dream" speech with some symbolism of Black History Month. Paul, however, could provide a portrait of King, and add an artistic twist such as having King look up to the clouds with the speech's words in them, symbolizing King's religious motivation and his vision that at the time seemed unattainable. According to Paul, the industry did not have designers skilled enough to design a shoe that intricate, and also probably could not because of copyright issues. Paul said that he has customized portraits on sneakers for many people, and that he is allowed because he is an artist commissioned to do so. For participants, *passionless* customization led to depthless superficiality in sneaker culture, but *passionate* customization was the answer to restoring artistry and originality.

For some of the customizers who viewed sneakers as a business, those who focused on the artistry were deemed more genuine than those who focus on the business aspects. As described above, they were able to reconcile their business practices of selling culture with their underlying intentions of promoting and innovating it. Other participants, however, did not see anything wrong with approaching custom sneakers as

strictly business. These participants did not understand it as a dichotomy of either art or business, but viewed themselves as in the ‘art business’. Steven said that sneakers, to him, were an “investment”, adding that he merely took advantage of his love for art and sneakers. He began customizing when he realized that he “could make a lot of profit off of sneakers, because at this point, sneakers are a big business.” Steven had no issue with customizers being driven by profit, as long as it did not detract from the quality of their art.

Ten participants actually started their own business involving sneakers, and saw custom sneakers as an avenue for them to become entrepreneurs. Six of these participants – Darren, Paul, Ken, Wayne, Cody, and Justin – started an entire fashion brand around their customized sneakers that extended into clothing, hats, and other fashion wear. Even Shane, who was not artistic and therefore customized his sneakers online through the industry, recognized that he could always turn his collection into a business: “We all know how the sneaker market works. You know sometimes if you hit hard times, you can take a couple pairs out of your collection and you can sell them.” Wayne recognized the irony of those who tried to downplay the business aspects of sneakers at a sneaker convention, which essentially is a spectacle of sneaker commodification. Those who were unapologetic about viewing sneakers as a business were also unapologetic about conforming to the latest ‘hot’ trends. They viewed this pursuit as merely fulfilling market demand. To them, making custom sneakers according to one’s exclusive tastes and interests was admirable, but it would stifle sales and lead to sneakers just sitting on one’s shelf. Nicole explained her rationale for making shoes that people wanted, stating: “Shoes are expensive... you can’t just make them and then hope

someone buys them. Because then they're just sitting there. They're customs, so if nobody likes how they look at that time, what are you gonna do?" For Nicole, customizing according to what was popular was common sense, while trying to subvert the popular trends was just bad business.

The ultimate goals of selling sneakers differed, however. For many participants, the goal was to make money and sustain a career in selling sneakers. Most approached customization as a part-time hobby, but six participants sold customized sneakers full-time. Cody viewed his business success as a means to broaden his profile; not to make himself more money but to increase his platform in order to circulate his artwork to consumers. Wayne created his brand to gain exposure for his design skills, with the hopes of one day being noticed by the industry companies and being offered a job. Justin created his brand to disseminate his artistic vision, although he was also hoping it led to bigger and better opportunities. For Darren and Taylor, their brand was created to ultimately empower the youth from where they grew up<sup>36</sup>.

For some participants, the business of sneakers was at odds with the personal meanings of sneakers, creating dilemmas. For example, Amber started off by making sneakers that were meaningful to her, but ended up selling her favorite sneakers when someone saw her wearing them and requested them. Also, Cody stated that the business aspect has detracted from his passion for art and customization. The expectations of his customers have added a level of stress that he aimed to avoid when entering the business. Cody states:

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<sup>36</sup> This is described in-depth in the next theme.



If I could sit down and do this all night, customize shoes and make art or whatever, I'm happy. But nowadays it's turned more into the business aspect. So I've been doing more customizations for people and commissions... if there was a time where I could breathe, I would love to do like 3 to 5 pairs just as a collection for myself. But right now I do it more for others. But I wanna get back to doing just my stuff, without the pressure and stress and anticipation of making somebody else's day.

Even for those who subscribed to the belief that sneakers were both a symbol of artistry and a profitable commodity, situations arose where they were forced to choose one over the other.

#### *4.2.4 'Walking Billboards': Customized Sneakers as Social Philanthropy*

Somewhat removed from the internal sneaker culture debates between individuality/conformity and artistry/business was a more positive theme: the use of customized sneakers as a way to “give back” to a certain community. Sneaker customization was used as a philanthropy, or the humanitarian effort to promote the welfare of others. Sometimes this was done directly through customizing shoes in a way to empower urban youth and provide them with sneakers as a way to improve self-esteem. Other times, sneakers were customized in a way to signal and promote group identity, as well as to show solidarity with certain groups based on political, ethnic, or regional affiliations. Two specific examples, those of Darren and Taylor, will be used to demonstrate the way sneakers were used as philanthropy to their communities of interest.

Darren, an African-American male, was always interested in sneaker culture as a child growing up in the inner-city. After becoming more serious about the fashion industry, he started his own fashion brand selling sneakers (customized and traditional), as well as other apparel. His plan was to sell apparel within his community with messages and designs uniquely meaningful in his locality. Darren stated that industry fashion brands had long attempted to promote and popularize certain messages with their apparel, but none of these messages applied directly to his community. More specifically, Darren wanted to include messages that were inspiring to youth individually, but also could create what he viewed as a “collective movement” of positivity and empowerment for inner-city youth amidst the harsh conditions in which they live. Darren described some of these messages:

So one of the original messages that caused us to go on this campaign was Rent Is Due. In my neighborhood that I grew up in, we all consider ourselves landlords. We all consider ourselves landlords for the simple fact that we wanna be in position to where we own the property that we live and we wanna own our skills... as opposed to renting them out to other people. So we want to be landlords versus being tenants. And the philosophy of a landlord is Rent is Due... Besides the application onto sneakers, just the message of Rent is Due is a linguistic form of symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990). Language, according to Willis, was the first element of symbolic work, as it serves as the instrument for communication, interacting, and showing solidarity with others. The phrase Rent is Due, for Darren and his community members, can be understood as a double entendre. On the individual level, Darren states that it was a psychological reminder to be landlords and take ownership of

their life and their skills. On a deeper, structural level, it was the linguistic appropriation of the slogan of those partially *responsible* for creating the iniquitous condition of his inner-city community: landlords, who collectively have a long history of creating and maintaining residential segregation through various forms of racial discrimination (Rothstein, 2018). Darren's next message continued with a similar theme:

Another one we do is "Each One Teach a Group." So you know "Each One, Teach One" is a famous slogan by the Nation of Islam. But "Each One Teach a Group" is an updated version. So we updated the philosophy because we feel like it fit the times a little more. A lot of the brothers that would've been out here teaching and doing leadership, the numbers have gotten smaller due to gentrification, genocide, mass incarceration, premature homicidal death. Due to all these things, the number of brothers or sisters that would've been leading is smaller. So instead of "Each One, Teach One", we say "Each One Teach a Group."

Though controversial, the Nation of Islam was a source of black empowerment for many inner-city urban African Americans throughout the Civil Rights era (Coates, 2018). This message also had a double meaning. On the individual level, invoking the phrase from the Nation of Islam could create that same feeling of empowerment for community members amidst inequality. On a deeper, structural level, linguistically appropriating and updating a Nation of Islam phrase that was created in the context of segregation and racial inequality serves as a grim reminder that the effects of those issues, as well as many new issues (gentrification, mass incarceration, etc), still play a significant and

material role in the lives of African Americans today. For Darren, these messages had a powerful effect when embedded into sneakers. He continued:

So that's kinda the idea behind putting these philosophies into the fabric or into the shoes or whatever it may be. Because at the end of the day, every time someone goes out and wears those shoes, people will see that and wonder what it means... and ask themselves how that applies to them.

To accomplish this, Darren restored and customized old sneakers to include these messages for his community to buy. Darren distributed them through sales, but also by randomly showing up to places of influence (which, in Darren's community, included skateparks, basketball courts, and parties) and giving away certain clothes for free. This process was similar to Nike's "broing" attempts, where they distributed Nike products in inner-city neighborhoods create both demand and new markets to profit from (Lury, 2011). Darren's motives were more altruistic. Darren said that he also did this to increase exposure to his brand, however he stated that this was so that more youth could have access to clothes they needed and could experience those messages of empowerment on an everyday-level. Darren believed his brand to be a community-oriented alternative to other brands that are only profit-oriented. He stated:

As we know, most brands are simply face value. There isn't a lot of contextual value behind the scenes, or a story or message or philosophy behind it. And if there is, it's very few and far between. So we wanted to increase the efforts in messagery or concepts or philosophies behind clothing and textiles because, you know, every single day we go out into the world and we're walking billboards. So we're trying to upgrade the philosophy of the community. I would say one of

the fastest ways to do that is to start putting it on textiles. The clothes, the pants, the shoes. So when people are walking around they see the ideas every single day. For Darren, in a society in which fashion and clothing has an expressive, symbolic, communicative value, to incorporate uplifting messages into the aestheticization of everyday life would be to signify that uplift (Baudrillard, 1983; Douglas & Isherwood, 1978; Featherstone, 2007). In Darren's much simpler words, postmodern consumers are walking billboards. The only question is, what will be the message of your billboard?

To create "walking billboards" of empowerment was in accordance with Darren's goal, which he stated was to have more of a social impact on the community than for a financial impact for himself. Darren explained his conceptualization of business growth:

We look at growth as, "how many youth are we impacting? How many youth are going out and actually doing something after they buy one of our shirts or shoes or come to one of our events?" So we got a lot of growth and a lot of young brothers out here doing great things based on the inspiration that we've laid.

To inspire, for Darren, was an end in itself. He also instituted local community workshops in which youth restored and customized sneakers themselves. This gave the youth a practice in which to channel their energy while learning valuable fashion-industry expertise regarding business and design. This assisted Darren in understanding the fashion tastes of his consumers, but also helped him gain a pulse of the youth and learn about the problems facing them. He explained the process:

In our workshop we [customized] about 12 pairs. So we took old Air Force Ones from the thrift store or recycles stores. Old low-top and high-top Air Force Ones. And we basically gave the youth Sharpie markers and different color duct tapes

and electrical tapes and different pieces to customize the shoes and told them to put messages and different philosophies on the shoes. So we utilize it as a way to be able to take the youth and get their creative juices out.

For the youth, the active experience of customizing sneakers was therapeutic, while the potential for symbolic creativity through design and messaging was an important medium of expressiveness. As a result, Darren viewed customized sneakers as a way to help youth from his community establish both a positive individual identity and a meaningful collective identity. Because of the rough conditions that Darren said he grew up in, he viewed customizing sneakers as a creative outlet for youth, especially inner-city black males, to productively express their emotions in a society that attributes aloof emotionlessness to black masculinity<sup>37</sup> (Majors & Billson, 1992). He stated:

A lot of these young kids that we serve, they don't have a voice. From a few different perspectives. They don't have a necessary platform of resources where if they got an idea, they can get that idea out there. So we're basically taking an idea that a lot of young people share and we manufacture it and put it into a concept and platform and we're distributing it for them. So that's one aspect of it. A lot of young people also don't necessarily have the language or the means to communicate what they're thinking or what they've been through.

Darren viewed himself as a cultural intermediary (Bourdieu, 1984), but one that advocates for those of low culture that do not have a voice, or adequate representation, due to their ascribed circumstances.

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<sup>37</sup> This embodied orientation is, in large part, a residual effect of racist stereotypes that positioned blacks as primitive, and therefore incapable of harboring and expressing complex human emotion.

Darren stated that while he operates his brand as a business, he is primarily motivated by driving social change and making a difference in the communities that raised him. Sneakers and fashion, although his area of expertise and interest, are just an avenue for him to make a contribution. Although the sneakers cannot change the structural barriers responsible for the disadvantages of the inner-city, Darren views sneaker customization as a potential coping mechanism. He explained:

Textiles, shoes, entertainment... all this shit is cool bro, but at the end of the day, we got bigger problems to solve. It's bigger issues than having the best shoes on and having the best fit on and being the flyest dude in the neighborhood. Like, we got real problems out here. We got kids out here with mental illness and post-traumatic stress disorder without even having been to the Army before. Like real life, that's what's going on in our communities. And I feel like the clothes and shoes and the whole process of textiles is somewhat therapeutic. It gives them an opportunity to exert that energy and let the world know what they're thinking and how they're feeling. So they can be able to be comfortable with their story and not feel like they locked in to where they come from or what they've been exposed to. That's really the situation.

For Darren, sneaker customization had a larger purpose than as a way to pursue distinct individuality or social acceptance through conformity. Instead, it was a small but significant vehicle for confronting the broader, debilitating issues that face his community.

Taylor's story was similar to Darren's; driven by the same goal of contributing to the plight of inner-city African-Americans, although in a different city than Darren. Taylor, an African-American male, also had a passion for sneakers and fashion as an adolescent, and eventually created his own personal brand that was based upon popular phrases in his city. One of his brand's initiatives was to use customized sneakers to reward academic achievement and incentivize a focus on one's studies. For this initiative, Taylor restores and customizes a free pair of shoes for each primary-school student who raises their grade by one level. Others have given away free shoes, but according to Taylor, his initiative is novel because nobody is "actually going into the schools and telling kids that if they raise their grade up, we're going to actually give them a custom shoe with their initials and everything." He gets his shoes mostly from donations, just as people donate old pairs of shoes to Goodwill or the Salvation Army. While visiting and giving shoes away to students in different public schools in the city, he speaks to the class about the importance of academic achievement and how to maintain constructive priorities amidst their disadvantage. Taylor said that in a short time, the initiative has produced positive results. According to teachers, Taylor said that students have already started to turn in more homework, try harder at in-class work, and overall have a more positive attitude towards learning.

Growing up as one of the students that he aims to help today, he also considered the social and psychological impacts of having shoes during adolescence. He said that, as problematic as it may be, not having an acceptable pair of shoes at that age is a recipe for being bullied. This notion corroborates Willis (1990), who argued: "with social identities increasingly defined in terms of the capacity for private, individualized consumption,



those who are excluded from that consumption feel frustrated and alienated” (p. 86).

Taylor reflected on the result of this ostracization, which for him was a feeling of internalized inferiority, anger, and an impulse to do whatever it took to have a certain pair of shoes to avoid it. Taylor attributed the excessive consumption of shoes, the robbery for shoes, and even the infamous sneaker killings (Fuller, 2015) as the byproduct of trying to avoid this ostracization. He explained:

These shoes are kind of more like a way for me to help stop some of the problems in [his city], because maybe that's one less kid that'll rob for a pair of shoes or one less kid that'll get bullied in school.

Taylor's initiative, in his eyes, was an attempt to preemptively address this issue. Taylor viewed giving sneakers to students as a way to dismantle this hierarchy, hopefully leading to numerous outcomes such as: increasing self-esteem, decreasing bullying, allowing students to express individuality and creativity in their shoes, allowing low-income families to not worry about spending money on sneakers, and more broadly helping to teach youth not to base their worth in their capacity to consume.

Taylor perceived his initiative as an unconventional approach to helping students flourish intellectually, something that the conventional school approach was not doing in his view. He understood potential critiques of his initiative, mainly that it will motivate students to learn in order to get sneakers rather than to learn for the sake of learning. To Taylor, though, that did not matter: “People can say what they want. ‘Oh my gosh. You know, kids only doing it because they get free shoes.’ What does it matter? If they're raising their grades and being excited and being positive, to me, it's working.” Taylor's future goal is to obtain the support of the city or a major corporation, so he can

implement his initiative on a broader scale and make more of an impact. Taylor stated that he did not profit from the initiative, but he did gain something from it personally: the feeling of making a contribution to his community. He explained the initiative's benefit:

[The initiative] is giving that feeling to kids who don't have power. I couldn't afford my own shoes in the 90s like that until probably the late 90s when I was a teen... I understand being a kid, the joy that shoes bring them... I get the same nostalgia seeing these kids being blissful.

Ultimately, Taylor viewed the impact of his initiative more broadly as restoring the reputation of his city. Through helping the youth, he aimed to change the national narrative about his city, which he said largely revolves around crime, poverty, and despair.

My future goal is to change and bring light back to [Taylor's city] because I'm tired of hearing about all the negative stuff. And there's plenty more people like me that are using different avenues to promote positivity in the city. I'm really sick of what's been reported about my city.

Though Taylor did not attribute the perceived ills of his city to the deficiencies of the individual actors within it, his initiative was his way of utilizing what he viewed as his talent to contribute by incentivizing the youth to navigate their structural disadvantages to the best of their abilities.

The use of customized sneakers to show solidarity based on regional, political, and racial affiliations was not limited to Taylor and Darren. Wayne and Justin, both African-American males who customized sneakers professionally, also engaged with themes of race in their customizations. In order to “make a statement without saying

anything”, Wayne customized one pair of shoes with a “#BLACKLIVESMATTER” message on them, and another pair with the message “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot” on them, both phrases referring to the recent movements to address police brutality and racial discrimination in the United States (Lowery, 2016). For Wayne though, the customizations had a deeper meaning. The shoes that he placed the messages on were from a popular non-athletic shoe brand that he claimed had a racist past. By adding these messages, he was not only signaling his politics and promoting a message he believed in, but was also subverting what he viewed as a racist history of the brand. Justin similarly used themes of race in his products. He stated that a large goal of his brand was include black and Latino representation in his art and his apparel. This came mostly through an inclusion of black and Latino films and children’s cartoons, which he claimed existed, but were not as popular as other cartoons. Justin’s reasoning for displaying these cartoons in his work was “because people don’t realize how many black and Latino cartoons are out there. So like, I just try to like keep pushing that. Kids don’t really get to see themselves in cartoons, so I wanted to put that forth.” For Justin, having black and Latino youth be represented through sneakers was important in giving them something to identify with throughout adolescence.

Shane, an individual customizer, used customization tactics to signal pride in the city that he grew up in by using a specific iconic brand that significance in his region. He went online to customize a pair of sneakers through New Balance, a brand that he says has historically had a strong association with his home city. According to Shane, New Balance sneakers have always been a “staple” of his city, even more popular than Jordan’s. He stated that: “coming up in [his city] in the early to mid 80s, everybody who

was anybody some type of money showed it by buying a pair of New Balance.” By this, Shane is suggested that New Balance shoes were an internal signifier of social status in his city. Shane customized his pair of New Balance with colors that he said were his city’s colors, with his personal sneaker-related nickname on the back. Overall, Shane said he intended to customize a sneaker to pay homage to his city. Shane said that “no matter where you go, you got on some New Balance, 9 times outta 10, people are gonna say ‘oh, he’s from [Shane’s city]’ just because of the New Balance.” Externally, James suggests with these comments that New Balance was also a signifier that one was from his city, and proud of it. Even when in other cities, Shane believed the customized shoes would allow him to form an unspoken connection with anyone else from his city; an esoteric bond that only they would recognize.

In summarizing the wide range of reasons for and meanings of sneaker customization, it is clear that infusion of group signifiers into sneakers were not merely expressive to others. Through consuming and customizing, participants used the expression of group belonging to internally negotiate self-identity and construct their own subjectivities. The use of commodities to establish these bonds is increasingly common in late capitalism, according to Lury (2011). However, echoing Moran (2005), Lury argues that belonging in groups and forming self-identity happen simultaneously, stating that “it is neither that belonging comes before identity nor that identity comes before belonging, but that belonging and identity are done together” (p. 206). In theorizing the apparent dichotomy of individuality and conformity in sneaker culture, and contemporary consumer culture more generally, it is important to remember that neither exists without

traces of the other. The pursuit of individuality and conformity had differential normative perceptions, yet both were methods for individuals to construct and express identity to others and to themselves.

Participants and consumers in late capitalism, in some capacity, have exhibited both individualist and conformist consumption behaviors when one or the other was deemed socially and culturally valuable. In addition, consumers were not completely ignorant of the broader social contexts in which their consumption behaviors and identity construction exist. This is in opposition to Willis' (1990) contention that for symbolic creators from common culture: "politics bore them. Institutions are too often associated with coercion or exclusion and seem, by and large, irrelevant to what really energizes them" (p. 129). While this may be true to Willis' participants, the opposite was true for my participants. As the initiatives of Darren and Taylor demonstrate, along with the customized messages from Wayne and Justin, sneaker customization was used as an explicit challenge to both the macro- and micro-political order. Customizers were not bored by politics or institutions; they were angered by them, and used their medium of sneaker customization to attempt to change the cultural and political formations in which they exist. Willis later pointed out that "even as 'the market' makes its profits, it supplies some of the materials for alternative or oppositional symbolic work. This is the remarkable, unstable and ever unfolding contradiction of capitalism supplying materials for its own critique" (p. 139). In this case, the industry provided the raw materials, but it was the conscious acts of symbolic creativity by customizers that transformed these market commodities in ways that critiqued the logics of its market production.

### 4.3 The Cultural Politics of Sneaker Customization

This section will explain the underlying reasons that individuals engage in sneaker customization by contextualizing how it emerged in response to various structural issues of sneaker culture. First though, I must describe some of these issues. Implicit throughout participants' discussions of the meanings of sneaker customization (and often, explicitly articulated) was a discontent for sneaker culture as it is currently constituted. This discontent, which was certainly a broader extension of the tension between individuality and conformity, was caused by what participants called "hypebeasts." A common term in the past decade of sneaker culture lexicon (typically used as a derogatory slur), hypebeasts can be defined as the pathological conformists. In other words, hypebeasts are those who mindlessly chase the latest 'hot' trends in order to fit in, or even more cynically, to gain money or influence<sup>38</sup>. At the other end of the spectrum are sneaker "purists." This group represents the individualists; those who consumed and customized for themselves, making and appreciating what they viewed as original art, while paying no mind to what others were doing. These definitions are ideal types that no individual seamlessly embodied, but these ideal types were at the center of the struggle over what sneaker culture is and what it should become. At the same time that this tension permeated at the street level, participants perceived the overarching

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<sup>38</sup> The definition of hypebeast I provide here is my own, derived from my conversations with participants, that I attempted to make sense of within the context of the analysis. More generally, Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defined hypebeast as referring to "a person who is devoted to acquiring fashionable items, especially clothing and shoes" ("Hypebeast"; [merriam-webster.com](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hypebeast); retrieved April 2019). Urban Dictionary, the popular repository of definitions of colloquial slang, provides a less formal, but slightly humorous definition: "A hypebeast is a kid that collects clothing, shoes, and accessories for the sole purpose of impressing others...it is slang for someone who is a beast (obsessed) about the hype (fashion) and will do whatever it takes to obtain that desired hype.... Equipped with Mommy's credit card, the hypebeast will try his hardest to make sure he has every pair of Nike's he saw Jay-Z wearing on 106 & Park" ("hype beast"; [urbandictionary.com](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hype%20beast); retrieved April 2019).

industry as manipulating both sides in order to maintain power and profit. This section will outline the dynamics between all three parties, and analyze how sneaker customization and sneaker culture has been influenced by the friction between purists and hypebeasts, the sneaker and fashion industry, social media, and a floating signifier (Baudrillard, 1981) that participants called The Culture.

#### *4.3.1 'Purists' vs 'Hypebeasts': Navigating Cultural Sanctity*

The divide between purists and hypebeasts can be summarized by Justin's quote from earlier. Justin said:

The way the sneaker game is now, a lot of people are just here for show. Here for whatever's hot, or whatever has a label on it or a brand name on it. Like that's what people wanna wear. But like, you can still tell people who actually have a love for sneakers.

For Justin, hypebeasts participate in sneaker culture for the show, whereas other people have a "love" for sneakers. The implication is that having a true passion, or the view of sneakers as an end rather than a means to an end, is the source of the divide between those in sneaker culture. Purists have a true love; they appreciate sneakers for their own sake. Hypebeasts, on the other hand, merely use sneakers as a way to obtain a broader goal; whether that be social acceptance, influence, fame, or profit. Participants viewed this as a recent development. According to participants, sneaker culture was birthed from original, artistic vision and motivation to be different from the mainstream. The fact that sneakers served as an expression of identity was celebrated and reminisced by participants. The past decade, though, is the "Hypebeast Era," as Cody termed it. In this

new era, sneaker consumers are overwhelmingly chasing the same brands, designs, and styles. Justin attributed it to the youth as well, stating that “the kids coming to these shows [sneaker conventions] today, all they know is Jordan, Off-White, Nike, and Adidas.” Paul described his view of this era:

You look now, there's Louis Vuitton print or the Supreme print on everything, or the Gucci print on everything. And it's so... tacky. It's like, how many times can you do the same thing over and over again? I don't know, to me it's one of those things where the genuine like – the passion about it has gone away and it's turned into just, you know, “hey I like this because I saw it on this person.” Whatever *other* people like.

For Paul, people are blindly consuming in order to impress, refusing to cultivate, or even acknowledge, a sense of individual identity apart from the brands that they adorn.

Perhaps, participants viewed the creative attachment to brands and styles (Gilroy, 1983) as going too far, as if the creativity has turned into a blind emulation that stifled necessary differentiation of selves (Sassatelli, 2007). The issue is not that the postmodern consumer is a “walking billboard” (in Darren’s words). For Paul, the issue is that every billboard was the *becoming the same*, and therefore the messages that the billboards exuded were becoming meaningless. In a sense, participants expressed concern for what they perceived a “waning of affect” in sneaker culture (Jameson, 1991), where sneaker design and consumption has become lost meaning beneath surface-level appearance, increasingly lacking the depth and passion with which sneakers previously were made.

Among sneakers, Jordans and a few Nike models were identified as the hypebeast targets, the most common symbols of this surface-level consumption. Among the broader



fashion industry (which has begun to create apparel that often mirrors athletic apparel, including making shoes to that are basically sneakers), the brands Off-White, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Supreme, and Bathing Ape were described as the hypebeast brands. Justin said that for the majority of sneaker culture in the hypebeast era, those are the only brands that people know, and therefore the only brands people would attempt to buy. This created a dilemma for sneaker customizers in the hypebeast era: sacrifice artistic integrity by conforming to the latest trends in order to stay competitive, or continue to make art and designs inspired by originality and risk losing customers to the myriad businesses acquiescing to the ‘hot’ trends. This was the choice for individual customizers. As described earlier, Justin, Paul, Cody, and Ken chose to pursue originality, while Nicole, Amber, and Thomas drew upon popular brands and styles in order to pursue financial success. For sneaker culture as a whole, participants who positioned themselves as purists believed that hypebeasts were ruining what made the culture special from the days of its origin: creative ingenuity in spite of broader stylistic mundanity. Brett stated that despite his undying love for sneakers, he no longer considered himself a sneakerhead<sup>39</sup> because the term has been diluted. For Brett, the term is now more associated with hypebeasts, who he says do not really care about sneakers but only care about what sneakers can do for them. For purists, hypebeasts threatened the sanctity of a sneaker culture that they were once proud of.

This creates an interesting development in the thinking of Willis (1990) and Jameson (1991). Willis spoke positively of the collapse of the cultural hierarchy that made cultural forms more accessible and democratic. Jameson, however, believed that

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<sup>39</sup> The common colloquial term referring to someone obsessed with sneakers, though with a positive connotation.

this collapse relegated artistic production to cultural populism, and was the impetus for the waning of affect, diminishment of meaning, and the overall debasement of elite cultural forms. The heightened accessibility for low culture – which included street level sneaker consumers and customizers – was a beneficial to my participants. Yet, the critique of debasement came from the bottom (common culture) rather than the top (elite culture). Instead of being the source of the debasement of cultural forms, it is those that now produce the popular art form of sneakers that are interested in maintaining the sanctity of a culture they take pride in. Simply put, it is those dipping down into the low art form of sneaker culture that are driving it towards depthlessness; the opposite of how Jameson (1991) conceived the cultural directionality of postmodern art production. The symbolic work (Willis, 1990) created by those of low culture was so significant that they constructed and enforced cultural boundaries to protect it. The reason for this protectionism may be due to the nefarious intentions of those who attempt to commodify, misrepresent, and exploit this common culture. For participants, these were hypebeasts and the sneaker/fashion, both of whom had ties to elite culture. I will describe next how hypebeasts debased sneaker culture, followed by a later discussion of how the industry debased it.

The complaints about the hypebeast era were not limited to appeals to abstract concepts such as sanctity of the culture. Many participants, even those that were not necessarily purists, derided the common practice of re-selling that was mainly associated with hypebeasts. Re-selling, according to participants, was the practice of buying highly-touted, exclusive products (such as limited-edition release of a Jordan sneaker) with the intent of substantially increasing the price and selling it back to those who did not

immediately get the product<sup>40</sup>. Sneaker re-selling is no mere hobby or fad: it is a billion-dollar industry (Levin, 2016, July 27). For many re-sellers, this is a full-time job. Re-sellers often utilize extreme measures to make sure they were one of the few to buy a product, such as camping out in front of stores for hours in order to get a sneaker, or setting up bots to buy products the second they are released online<sup>41</sup>. The goal of re-sellers is not to wear the sneakers that they go to such lengths to buy, nor is it to even keep them. The explicit goal is to profit off of those who love sneakers by capitalizing on the exclusivity of the shoe and hoping someone will want that shoe enough to pay an extra couple hundred or thousand dollars for it<sup>42</sup> (see Levin, 2016, July 27 for a story of how a 16-year-old made an estimated \$200,000-\$300,000 in one year re-selling sneakers). Though participants say that they would consider themselves sneakerheads, their only interest in sneakers is to, as Paul would say, make “a quick buck.”

The effect of this trend is not just a concentration of sneaker culture’s most coveted resources in the hands of those who view them as mere financial entities. The broader effect, according to participants, is that sneaker purists and average sneaker

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<sup>40</sup> Renowned 19-year-old reseller Brandon Webb explained the re-selling process: “It all comes down to supply and demand. Companies like Nike and Adidas with release exclusive sneakers... Re-sellers know these sneakers will sell out, and so does everyone who wants to wear them. The combination of limited availability and hype drives prices through the roof on the secondary market... If there is hype and exclusivity, there’s money to be made.” (“This 19-year-old entrepreneur...”, 2019; April 23; [Entrepreneur.com](#)).

<sup>41</sup> In the same interview, Webb described his team’s method: “I get nearly all my pairs online. The average reseller will use computer programs called bots to try to get their hands on sneakers. Bots virtually automate everything, attempting to rapidly check out multiple pairs from websites before they sell out, much faster than any human could... The people making the most money have connections with investors, elite hackers, and industry insiders, as well as access to private software that essentially gives us a monopoly over the supply... We can get thousands of pairs from our laptops, while someone might camp out all night just to snag a single pair – even if they use a bot.”

<sup>42</sup> Also from Webb’s interview, referring to a recently-released pair of Air Jordan’s: “Each pair cost \$190, and I spent about \$6,000 on the setup to make it happen, so that’s like \$25,000 total. The sneaker released exclusively in the EU, so resale prices were very high. We could flip each pair for \$1,000 profit the same day we bought them, but today that stock of 100 shoes is worth about \$290,000. Not too bad for a day’s work.”

consumers are no longer able to buy new sneakers at reasonable prices. Additionally, the consumers being boxed out of buying sneakers are the groups from which sneaker culture was birthed: lower-to-working class, urban, majority African American youth (Turner, 2015). Hypebeasts, who participants said often have the means to pay the heightened prices for products they hope to impress others with, usually do not hail from this group. Those groups who have played a significant role in sneaker culture's popularization— for whom sneaker culture is most meaningful to, and whom are most likely to stake core parts of their identity in sneakers — are no longer able to participate in the culture without having to pay the exuberant re-sale price. Taylor stated his view:

I'm not knocking the hypebeast culture or the re-sale people... But I understand, you know, why people would get upset. Being somebody who used to be in love with sneakers, that now if I'm trying to get a pair of sneakers, you want me to pay an extra \$50 or \$100 'cause you got 'em an hour before me? Nah, I'm not really feeling that.

Eric, speaking hypothetically to the re-sellers, summarized the logic of re-selling from the perspective of those harmed by it. Also frustrating to purist participants is that hypebeasts and re-sellers do not understand what makes sneaker culture a culture, nor do they seem interested in learning about its history or deeper meanings. Cody explained this point, stating that he's "not the biggest fan of this hypebeast era because people are re-selling shoes, but don't even know the meaning of them." I have made the case for the rich variety of meanings for sneakers in the previous section, as have Wilson (1996), Fuller (2015), Turner (2015), Vanderbilt (1998), and various others. Hypebeasts' lack of recognition of these meanings, paired with the lack of willingness to become informed of

them, was perceived by participants as insulting and disrespectful. Despite the complete ignorance of deeper significance, hypebeasts used sneakers for their own gain. I argue what occurs in the re-sale, hypebeast era, then, can be understood as a form of contemporary sneaker *gentrification*. There is a tangible displacement of sneaker culture's original consumers, who appreciate the artistry and sanctity of sneaker culture, for those who use sneakers as a way to obtain profit, fame, or influence.

Not all participants who discussed the hypebeast era shared the same sense of pessimism. Shane, who described himself as a purist who has always had a deep love for sneakers, said that he did not care about hypebeasts and re-sellers because it did not affect him. When asked for his thoughts on the hypebeast era, he stated: "I mean, a lot of people feel that way [negative towards hypebeasts]... but it's like, look, it's not my lane. If it doesn't directly affect me, I'm good. It doesn't change what I do." For Shane, hypebeasts did not hinder his ability to appreciate sneakers and use them to express individuality. Taylor acknowledged that re-selling was mainly hurting innocent sneakerheads. Especially problematic to Taylor was when re-sellers bought kids-sized sneakers, forcing children to have to pay the heightened price and boxing out those who could not afford to. However, Taylor viewed hypebeasts and re-sellers as rational actors that are a product of the sneaker market. He argued: "it's not [re-sellers'] fault that they're intelligent enough to understand that they can make more money off [re-selling]." Taylor's view was that if consumers stopped buying re-sold sneakers, the practice would diminish: "It's up to you not to buy it. Gotta stop pointing fingers." Taylor placed the onus of consumers to alleviate the issue of re-selling by reducing the demand for it.

The actions of the sneaker and fashion industry added another layer to the complexity of the changing sneaker culture. Participants claimed that the industry not only understood the practice of re-selling, but actively *incentivized* it with their distribution tactics. Participants viewed the industry as catering to re-sellers by releasing an increasingly-limited supply of certain models. The industry then could save money by producing fewer sneakers, but raising the price of them. Price is not as much of a concern for re-sellers as it is for normal consumers, since re-sellers aim to make that money back with profit. For the industry, re-selling means that demand is relatively consistent regardless of price. Who is wearing the sneakers, and how much they paid for them on the secondary market, is hardly an industry concern. One of the potential causes that was identified by participants for the descent into the hypebeast era, as well as another tool used by the industry to assist in that descent, was the emergence of social media.

#### *4.3.2 Pursuing 'Influence': Customized Sneakers in the Social Media Age*

Social media was identified as playing a large role in the proliferation, and exacerbation, of the hypebeast influence on sneaker culture. According to participants, social media has had both positive and negative effects. The main positive aspect was that social media made it much easier for one's customizations or brand to become visible on a large scale. Instead of having to capitalize on social connections – or just a lucky break – in order to gain exposure, social media allowed one's repository of products to be seen by either going viral or steadily building an online following. This expedited the process by which street level customizers and brand entrepreneurs could both expand their reach and get noticed by a larger brand for a potential buyout or

employment opportunity. For example, Cody customized a pair of sneakers that were inspired by his favorite tobacco brand. After posting them online and having those sneakers get re-posted and spread, that tobacco brand contacted Cody asking for a partnership. Now, Cody said that the brand paid him for the ability to advertise those sneakers and to make more similar customizations like it. Cody also said that the audience he gained from people loyal to that brand began to look through his other artwork, and Cody's overall following grew exponentially. Because of examples like this, some participants viewed the ability of social media to connect everyday people directly to be a method of subverting the industry and shifting power back to the street level. As Darren articulated it: "I feel like the tides are shifting in the right direction... [there] shouldn't be a monopoly on culture." In effect, social media was assisting in the democratization of culture (Jameson, 1987; Willis, 1990), allowing those without the power and resources of the industry to influence trends and designs of sneaker production.

Despite these positive changes that were identified, participants mentioned even more negative effects of social media for sneaker culture. First, social media was believed to be the medium through which certain brands became trendy. Simply put, it was the primary source for hypebeasts to target what was 'hot' and subsequently conform to it. Second, social media was believed to be manipulated by the industry, who participants said would pay people with significant influence to buy certain brands, giving off the impression that those influencers chose to wear it on their own. Darren discussed this point, stating: "the only reason why these brands sell as much product as they do is because they get influential young people to wear the products on social

media.” For Darren, the success of industry brands relied on their association with social media influencers. Additionally, social media was also where the industry looked to find out what was ‘hot.’ This information was then used by the industry to figure out how to tailor their products to those trendy designs. This sometimes resulted in industry brands, or even other customizers or designers who had a larger following, stealing the designs or ideas from everyday people who did not have as large of an online presence, often without repercussion. Paul described how he has seen this happen:

You see artists doing quality work. And you see someone copy that quality work and maybe just leave it up on the right influencer’s timeline. The influencer posts it and all of a sudden, that person has instant credibility when they haven’t done anything to earn it. It’s come overnight through social media just because they got an influencer to share it and tag that first. Meanwhile, there’ll be an individual that had been working on their craft for a year or two or three that’s doing it right, that stands by their product and that person gets nothing. And that’s heartbreaking for me.

For Paul, whose interest in sneaker culture was rooted in artistic creativity, social media provides a medium for passionate artists to be exploited. The quality of one’s art was secondary to their visibility and influence on social media, and those with influence had a disproportionate amount of power in shaping the trajectory of sneaker culture.

Third, social media was the place where hypebeasts were most likely to gain the acceptance or influence that they coveted, as the desire to obtain “buzz” on social media was viewed as the reason hypebeasts wanted the latest designs. Some participants viewed hypebeasts as only being concerned about likes and followers, rather than consuming



what they actually enjoyed wearing. As Wayne solemnly puts it: “that validation of... the like button on Instagram or whatever on twitter... All of that is the same drug.” For Wayne, social media influence, regardless of its superficiality, was addictive. The rational decision then, for the consumer who pursues social media validation, is to post what is most likely to be widely accepted. By that very definition, those chasing “likes” were driven towards conforming to popular styles<sup>43</sup>. These three reasons, in aggregate, indicated for participants that social media was the reason that sneaker culture became so conformist.

Fourth, social media was where the re-sale market was occurring, as buyers and sellers could connect remotely. As a result, some participants also viewed social media as the reason that sneaker culture shifted to re-selling. Whereas once, re-sellers had to stand in line or camp out in front of retail stores to obtain exclusive sneakers, they now could do it online from their home (this, of course, because the industry has shifted to online releases). Also, consumers and re-sellers could transact online rather than having to meet at sneaker conventions that only occurred periodically.

Fifth, online blogs, video channels, and articles who operated through social media were viewed as opinion leaders and often had the power to dictate what was desirable. This process dialectically set the course of sneaker culture. Paul stated that these opinion leaders were the first to appreciate the re-sale market, and therefore were

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<sup>43</sup> Matt Welty (2018, Nov. 21), in his article for Complex titled “You Can’t Buy Respect in Sneaker Culture”, wrote: “The average person on the internet feels the need to keep up with those who are swimming in their riches, and they do this by acquiring shoes with high price tags. The internet has made everything a numbers game. Posting a pair of Yeezys on Instagram will get more likes than a pair of ASICS Gel-Lyte IIIs. Writing about Off-White x Nike on a website will get more views than a story, no matter how well it is written, on the Mizuno Sky Medal. Bills need to be paid and bigger numbers are always more attractive than smaller ones, no matter how good the content. Sneakers that resell for \$1,000 are always going to pique more interest than shoes that go for half of their retail price, if you're lucky.”

able to use their online influence to define sneaker culture in that way. Simultaneously, these opinion leaders were hesitant to accept sneaker customization at first, often arguing that it ruined the traditional sneakers that the culture was built upon. However, when sneaker customization became more popular (partially because of street level customizers on social media), those same opinion leaders began using customization for online content. Now, sneaker customization is used by the same opinion leaders for their own profit (in either currency or influence). Justin summarized his thoughts on social media within sneaker culture:

I think everything is predicated off social media right now. Pretty much, like, kids are running to social media right now. If you look at the demographics, it's probably like 20 and under. And those are the kids running the streetwear game and the sneaker game and the re-sale game. So you have to check social media because that's what they're using and that's who they're trying to sell to.

According to Justin, if hypebeasts and re-sellers were not the main producers and consumers of what is 'hot' in sneaker culture, they were at least the most visible. As a result, participants viewed them as having a disproportionate influence on the constitution of sneaker culture, making purists and original sneakerheads feel as if they now have a marginalized status in the culture they feel they created.

It is in this context that the significance of sneaker customization must be understood. Its rise can be regarded as a way to re-establish individuality, in an artistic manner, amidst a sneaker culture that participants viewed as increasingly lacking it. One can view this approach as overly-romantic of past sneaker consumption, as it can

certainly be argued that sneaker culture has always been conformist (after all, consumers were lining up outside retail stores for days to get the latest Jordan's since the 1990s; Fuller, 2015). However, the difference for participants was that the sneaker industry of the past was steeped in relative originality. The sneakers being designed and released by the industry in the past were a "fresh" look, something that consumers often had not seen prior to the point. Recently though, participants viewed the industry as both following and incentivizing the descent into conformity. One way this occurred was through the accusation that all the sneakers being released by the industry are increasingly homogenous, lacking in innovation or novelty. As a result, consumers who consumed traditional sneaker through the industry could not help but have a sneaker that looked similar to everyone else's. There were very few choices for those aiming to maintain individuality through consumption (Sassatelli, 2007).

Some participants viewed current industry sneakers as lacking in innovation and novelty. Instead, the industry actively weaponized the nostalgic nature of sneakers in order to stimulate new consumption. Willis (1990) pointed out that a common trend in symbolic creativity by the *common culture* was "the rehabilitation and raiding of previous sartorial styles... Retro style is part of a general trend in contemporary culture which ransacks various historical moments for their key stylistic expressions and then re-inserts and recombines them in current fashion" (p. 88). While this may have been existent in early sneaker culture (especially with the retro-Chuck Taylor's; Turner, 2015), it has fallen out of favor with participants. It was instead the sneaker industry that was accused of being increasingly reliant upon the styles of the past, much to the disenchantment of participants who pursued novelty. For example, instead of releasing an original design,

industry brands will “re-release” certain shoes that were popular in the late 80s/90s, or release an “updated” look of designs that have been around for years<sup>44</sup>. Cody was especially critical of this industry trend:

for one of the most successful companies, all I’ve seen released is re-releases of Jordans and re-releases of these Nikes. How about we just take a step back and go back to the drawing board? And let’s think about some Nike’s that haven’t been released yet, rather than having the fourth or fifth release of the blue Foams [popular Nike shoes] that we’ve already seen?

Cody’s comments reflect Jameson’s (1991) pessimistic attribution of simulated nostalgia as the language of postmodern art. Jameson writes of postmodern art production after the collapse of high-modernist art: “the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture” (p. 18). Nostalgia, when appropriated by the industry, was understood as a cheap attempt to create profit without putting in the creative work that would warrant it.

Furthermore, these “re-releases” and “updates” from the industry would often be high-priced limited-releases, which participants said were direct appeals to re-sellers. Cody added that this practice leads to the exclusionary, gentrified sneaker culture described earlier. He staunchly argued:

The re-releases and then a shoe being sold out and then going up in pricing, I totally understand that. But not if you’re only going to release five pairs. There’s a lot of kids out here, regardless of what they’re going through, getting good

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<sup>44</sup> In the summer of 2018, Nike re-released nine pairs of Air Jordan’s originally released from 1986-2003, ranging from \$160-\$225 (Freeman, 2018, July 21).

grades to get the money, busting they ass to get the money, working a job to get the money, because they really care about these shoes. And the people who are in control of them, they don't.

For Cody, the kids working hard to get the money to buy sneakers were those who appreciated sneakers as an end. Their access to sneakers were being harmed by “the people who are in control of them”, referring to both hypebeasts and the industry, who only care about the profit that sneakers can bring them. Combining these arguments, it is clear that participants viewed the industry as an active agent in creating and sustaining the “hypebeast” era. Instead of countering the decline of original production (Jameson, 1991) that this era was abetting, the industry contributed to it; embracing pastiche at the expense of those who enjoyed when the originality of sneaker culture was its defining feature. Sneaker customization, then, is not just an act of anti-conformity; it also must be understood as an act of resistance against industry brands.

It is for this reason the sneaker customization was primarily a phenomenon that occurred first, and primarily, on the street-level with everyday artists and customizers. As stated earlier, participants viewed street-level customization as the most legitimate form, whereas industry customization barely fit the definition for most participants. If street-level customization was the reflection of a democratized culture that allowed for the inclusion of this without traditional modernist high-cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 2007; Willis, 1990), industry customization represented a relic of a cultural hierarchy in which those at the top had exclusive power to create and distribute culture. According to Justin however, street-level customization, in some form, has existed throughout the history of sneaker culture. When asked about the implications and

potential outcomes of customization at the street level, he stated: “I feel like it’s always been that way. Where like people have the opportunity to customize their stuff... all the way back to people having an airbrush and stuff like that. It’s nothing new. It just is reinvented.” Regardless of the form it resulted in, Justin viewed symbolic creativity as a residual trend rather than an emergent one (Williams, 1977). Yet, it was when customization became popular and a source of business for professional customizers that the industry began to commodify it in their own way. Taylor stated that street customization has always been around, but “the companies just caught up to it... what the major companies are doing is keeping up with the trends of what other people are doing.” If the significance of street customization was to restore individuality from a homogenized industry, then industry customization was viewed as little more than a superficial attempt by the industry to recoup and profit from a flourishing practice that they were not in control of. The next section will outline the symbolic and material differences between street-level and industry-level customization.

#### *4.3.3 Pursuing Symbolic Creativity: ‘Street’ Customization vs ‘Industry’ Customization*

Despite industry customs being viewed as a cheap appropriation of street-level customization, they still have impacted sneaker culture. Some of my participants, and even more people within sneaker culture more generally, have customized shoes online through the industry. Online customization entailed going onto the website of an industry brand (Nike, Adidas, Under Armour, etc), choosing a model of sneaker to customize, and electronically choosing the color, and sometimes material of certain parts of the shoe (such as the sole, laces, tongue, logo, etc). Online customizers also had the option to

include a few characters of text, in order to presumably add a number or personal message<sup>45</sup>. After finalizing their customizations and paying anywhere from a 30-50% markup from the price of the traditional model, consumers would receive their customized sneakers in 4-6 weeks<sup>46</sup>.

Participants discussed numerous advantages and disadvantages of online industry customs, ranging from strictly material to symbolic implications. Most of the advantages were related to ease and convenience. Shane said that he chose industry customization because he was not talented at art, and it allowed him to create a unique sneaker anyway. He explained: “I think [industry customization] is great because everybody can showcase their talent. Everybody can show their individuality through a sneaker... and it’s not that far from the original price out the store.” For Shane, the extra money he spent was worth the opportunity to create a unique shoe using only a mouse. Paul described online industry customization as a “cool platform” for those who did not, for some reason, believe in street customization. For Taylor, industry customizations were a better physical product than street customs because they were more durable and less prone to smearing or scraping (compared to street customizations). Taylor also believed that the price of industry customs was generally less than the price of quality street customizations from top-tier professional customizers.

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<sup>45</sup> Nike’s policy for the personalized message is no “profanity”, “inappropriate slang”, “insulting or discriminatory content”, “content construed to incite violence”, “material that Nike wishes not to place on products” and anything that “violates another party’s trademark or intellectual property rights” (“Personalization Policy...”, retrieved 2018). What messages are eligible for inclusion is moderated however, sometimes along political lines. For example, Nike ID refused to add the message “SWEATSHOP” to their customized shoes. Phrases such as Muslim, Islam, or Allah were denied (though later accepted after backlash), while phrases such as God, Jesus, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu were always accepted. (Elkins, 2017, Aug. 3; Grenoble, 2016, Feb. 29).

<sup>46</sup> See Moser et al., 2006, for a breakdown of the miAdidas business model.

Participants were much more critical than complementary of industry customization though, especially in comparison to street customization. As described earlier, street customs were symbolically more meaningful than industry customs, which were perceived from their origin as reactive appropriations of artistic expression. If street customization was a form of symbolic creativity, industry customization was symbolic imitation. Additionally, online industry customs provided less potential to be truly individual, partially due to the limits of control the customizer has. Participants pointed out that the online platform only allows customizers to choose between a handful of simplistic colors for only a few parts of the shoe. The text that was added was also subject to the guidelines of the company, and could be rejected at the company's discretion. For street customizations, on the other hand, the possibilities of creative design were just about endless. Because of this lack of design options, participants viewed online industry customizations as more susceptible to replication, therefore diminishing the probability of the sneaker being a true "one-of-one" statement of individuality.

Shane, despite his positive outlook on industry customization, said that I was the first person he told that he made his New Balance shoes online through the website. For Shane, it was not as much about the stigma of industry customs as it was the fact that he worried that someone would go straight to the website after seeing the shoes and duplicate them. Instead, he said that he lied and told people that he had them done through a street customizer in order to protect their novelty. He explained: "I don't want a 2<sup>nd</sup> pair, or a 5<sup>th</sup> pair, and a 10<sup>th</sup> pair floating around. The fact that they're one of one, I would prefer to keep it that way." This fear was not an issue for street customizers, for



whom they viewed the lack of replicability of their sneakers as a substantial advantage over online industry customizing. Taylor stated that “big-level street designers mostly don't duplicate the same thing, or they can't, because it's all done by hand. So even if they tried to, the chances of you getting it the same is slim.” For Taylor, quality art could not be copied. There were also participants, such as Lance, who did not agree with the price markup of industry customs. He stated his position:

I didn't agree with the extra expense. I mean if we're talking Nike specifically, theirs is a bit high. If we're talking Adidas, theirs isn't bad. But it's like, for the limit they're putting on what I can actually customize, it doesn't seem like creative freedom to me. It destroys the purpose for me, especially with the extra money I'm paying.

For Lance, the purpose of customization is “creative freedom”, which is diminished by the industry's lack of options. According to participants for whom the purpose of customization was to create something unique, street customization was universally superior, even if the high-quality customizations cost more than the online industry ones.

In general, participants understood customization at the street level as purer and more capable of fulfilling one's creative desires than industry customization. Even though it was often driven by an anti-industry attitude, the industry was not completely removed from street-level consumption. The sneakers that artists customized – their “blank canvases” – were often plain Nike, Adidas, or Vans shoes. However, these were often older, and therefore cheaper, models that were restored to look new. It was still conceptualized as a rejection of industry production since it was seen as an alternative to buying the new industry releases; a way to avoid, as Taylor put it, “buying the same shoe

over and over and over.” Consuming at the street-level, then, was viewed not only as a way to avoid conformity, but to retain power from an industry that was perceived to have too much of it. Industry consumption of traditional sneaker, of course, was still more common, as it had been entrenched for decades. Participants, though, viewed the industry as using their market dominance for manipulative and exploitative purposes; detached from the interests of the groups that have primarily granted them dominance with their loyal consumption<sup>47</sup>.

Cody’s critique of industry was that it was out of touch with this demographic, which he called The Culture (a notion with an ambiguous definition, also defined later). Cody believed that the industry is supposed to be mindful of the interests of The Culture. Instead, Cody suggested that the industry needed a more “down-to-earth perspective” in order to “get The Culture back into being a part of it.” For Cody, the industry had forgotten about The Culture. Street-level customizers were the heroes, in the eyes of participants, because they were representatives and advocates of The Culture that were attempting to bring true artistry back into it. Wayne said that he consumed at the street-level because that is where the artistic talent resides. Street-level customizers could cater to his tastes in a way that the industry no longer could. He stated:

The sneaker industry, no matter how many people they have working for them...  
like there are people out here who are really creative that they cannot really top.  
Like there are really people out here who do this for a living. This is what they do.  
This is all they know. They can be their own Nike, they just don’t have the  
resources.

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<sup>47</sup> This is discussed in-depth in the next section.

The difference between the visibility of street-level customizers and the industry was not talent, but resources such as money, influence, and entrenched consumer loyalty.

Similarly, Thomas described why he also viewed street customizers as such an essential development in sneaker culture:

You're always gonna have those mainstream companies and everything. You can't take them out. Those are billion-dollar companies. But like I said, those starving artists and those smaller guys who are trying to come up and they could throw their own touch on stuff that these mainstream businesses are putting together... there's a lot of different categories that the street artists are touching that the companies aren't putting out at this time.

In other words, street customizers were sneaker culture's version of cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1984) at the cutting edge of post-Fordist production. These cultural intermediaries constituted the driving force of fashion innovation, whereas industry customization was merely a reactive force.

The industry was not completely blind to this development. In fact, participants viewed the industry as taking steps to reclaim symbolic (and financial) control from the street-level. Justin perceived a new trend in which the industry attempts to replicate the designs from street-level customizations. Justin explained:

I'm looking at all the releases that Jordan and them are doing – even Nike with releasing the Foam Posits – it's every other month in every color you could think of. These shoes now look like customs. They look like the fake shoes that you would go online and buy, you see what I'm saying. It's weird to me. It's stuff that you would see in like a counterfeit shop. You wouldn't even see that in a real

sneaker shop. But now that's the way people want to look. They want the bright colors and the different colors. People don't want to be just black, white, red or blue. So you see regular shoes from the top brands starting to look customs.

In an ironic twist of Willis' (1990) conception, Justin viewed the industry as constantly attempting to appropriate the symbolic creativity of street customizers. Perhaps this is an industry response to the critique of conformity and monotony of sneaker designs. Yet, Justin perceived this as not an attempt to become more original, but an overt attempt to tap into the consumer market the street customizers have been selling to. Nicole, echoed Justin's concerns, stating:

I've seen a lot of... especially Jordan brand, they've been stealing customizers ideas and putting it on their shoes. The fake Jordan ones come from customizers a lot. So we as customizers can't really take credit for it because it's technically their shoes, but the ideas came from us.

Participants like Nicole believed that while the new colors and designs may be novel, they're still an act of mimicry – without proper attribution – of the customizers that have found a flaw in the industry's approach. Paul viewed this as the unfortunate reality of the power that brands have, plainly stating that: “if you're coming with a cool colorway, Nike has the strength to make that colorway in bulk and make tons of money off that.” Amber shared the same concern, stating that the risk of customizing is that “when you start customizing stuff and you see bigger companies like your custom shoes, they'll make their own version of your own shoe and make way money off of it than you could.” This pattern is a reason for the formation of boundaries around the creative production in low culture as described earlier in the chapter. Street-level customizers always had to be a

step ahead of the industry in the pursuit of individuality and in the defense of themselves being appropriated.

These anti-industry attitudes and practices on behalf of customizers, ironically, often existed among a desire to be recognized, or even employed, by the industry. While professional customization was often oriented towards a pursuit of art or business, some participants viewed it as a way to get noticed by the industry. For these participants, despite street customization being more respectable, there was a ceiling on how profitable it could be. Therefore, career-wise, participants who wanted to design sneakers for a living often wanted to eventually be hired by the industry. This could happen either through full-time employment or a partnership. Justin, who had been critical of the industry throughout his entire interview, admitted that one of his main goals was to collaborate with Nike on a sneaker or obtain a position in sneaker design. Paul told the story of one of his friends – also a street-level professional customizer – who gained a large online following from his customizations, and eventually was approached by a top brand for his input on industry sneaker. The top industry brand paid him for his ideas and he earns residuals on the sneakers that he helped design. Paul commented: “everyday he wakes up, he’s making money from the apparel he designed. That’s the dream. That’s the goal.”

Some participants shared concerns for customizers who became corporate, worrying that they would “sell out” by conforming to the latest ‘hot’ trends or giving up creative control to the industry that prioritizes profit over artistry. Yet, most participants viewed industry promotion as an opportunity for street-level customizers – many of whom are lower-to-working class ethnic minorities – to climb the social ladder and

establish a legitimate career doing something that they have a true passion for. In fact, some believed that the more street-level customizers that are able to gain industry positions, the more they could have a positive influence on the industry and overall sneaker culture. Darren viewed this process as happening already, stating that:

What's coming to fruition is that the influencers [street customizers] are becoming the producers. The influencers are not representing the other people's brands any more, they're representing their own brand... They're becoming the manufacturers and the producers of the actual collections of clothes and shoes, which is putting them into power positions. So now the brands have to fight for their attention.

Instead of those of low culture having to associate themselves with the industry to find success, Darren viewed the industry as being reliant upon the street-level because of its reputation for talent, quality, originality, and creativity. For Darren, the industry had no choice but to strike deals with the street-level customizers who, if left independent, may continue to encroach upon their market. Darren viewed this as a positive development, as it gave those derived from low culture more power in relation to the industry. Wayne shared this optimistic outlook on the trajectory of street-level customization in the industry, stating:

People come in and design and if you're good enough, they will hire you. That's like an opportunity that wasn't there before for a lot of people. You don't have to go to school now. You can stay at home in your basement designing shoes, making Instagram posts and now you're poppin<sup>48</sup>. It's very easy, you just gotta be

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<sup>48</sup> Colloquial term for popular and respected.

on it and be able to do it, and to understand that like, yeah the big industries are winning but... they've been here a hundred years. Like they've been doing this and we're starting out. It's an opportunity that nobody can be mad about.

For Wayne, the big industries are winning due to their abundance of resources, as discussed earlier. The hiring of street customizers was mutually-beneficial for both parties on the small scale. On the large scale, however, Wayne viewed the distribution of power shifting towards the street level, regardless of what tactics the industry exercised to maintain it. The implications of this power shift would be not only career opportunities for sneaker customizers, but a more direct representation of the groups and communities from which sneaker customizers emerge. The more that people from The Culture (as participants termed it) were in positions of control of the industry and sneaker consumption, the more that those within The Culture could make a living and the interests of The Culture would be represented.

#### *4.3.4 Representing 'The Culture': Racial Politics of Sneaker Customization*

This notion of The Culture that has been brought up throughout this analysis has a specific meaning for participants that was more complex than just sneaker culture. It was also more complex than black culture, or urban culture, or working-class culture. This definition, which I will first explain in this section, is important to clarify in order to understand what some participants felt like was not being properly represented by the industry. The phrase was used verbatim by 10 of 15 participants, often to state that the importance of sneakers is somehow tied to their imagined position with The Culture. For example, both Nicole and Cody, when asked the first question of what sneakers meant to

them, replied verbatim: “they’re part of the culture.” Few felt the need to even define it, indicating that it was a phrase so established in the lexicon of their social circle that it transcended ambiguity. I was familiar with the term; so much so that it did not occur to me until I had completed about half of my interviews to ask participants for their definitions. Through the way I had heard it used (and certainly in large part due to its representation in advertising and popular culture; Wilson, 1996), I had always understood The Culture to mean black culture. Specifically, I assumed that it referred in some way to lower-to-working-class, urban, African-Americans. While participants shared my sentiment slightly, when they began to explicate their definition, it became obvious that The Culture signified something much more intricate and elusive.

Each participant that I asked had a slightly different interpretation, but in aggregate, The Culture in this context broadly referred to a complex amalgam of the practices, knowledges, interests, and dispositions of those who participants believed created and promoted “sneaker culture.” The majority of these participants discussed The Culture with an explicit intertwinement with themes of race, class, and/or location; often similar to my conception. In the answers of some participants, it was clear that The Culture was a euphemism used in place of discussing race directly, which, understandably, was uncomfortable for participants. However, for those who were open to speaking about it, the criteria for being understood as a part of The Culture relied on more than just these relatively-stable factors of identity. A portion of my interview with Ken illustrates this point. He was an African-American man who only customized sneakers for himself as a hobby, but sold clothing. Ken created a clothing line that he said



was based on something more specific than black culture: what he called hip-hop culture. This prompted me to ask for a more precise definition.

**Ken:** My clothing line is hip-hop based. It's odes to the culture of hip hop. So —... so we can make sure we don't forget those things where we came from. Like the Wu Tang cone<sup>49</sup>. A lot of young kids, they probably couldn't name a Wu Tang member.

**Brandon:** What's hip hop culture to you, if you could define that?

**Ken:** It's easily definable. It's a culture based off of four pillars of The Culture. So you got DJing, MCing, breaking, and graffiti. That evolved into a whole bunch of different things. But it's the culture not only of the music but everything that's around that.

By the phrase, "it's a culture based off of four pillars of The Culture," Ken (echoing Turner, 2015) indicated that he viewed hip-hop culture as a subculture of the broader notion of The Culture. Rose (1994) made a similar argument, suggesting that hip-hop culture emerged as a primarily African-American subversion of authority through style, expressing discontent of marginalization from the white mainstream. Yet, the consumption of hip-hop, and The Culture through extension, has not retained this meaning in its diffusion to mainstream culture. As Andrews and Silk (2011) argue, hip-hop has come to represent "a pure, authentic, and unadulterated expression of the (American) inner-city experience, with all the racial fears and fascinations that it holds within the popular imaginary" (p. 1632). The popular meaning of hip-hop, similar to basketball and (as I have argued) sneakers, has been constructed as one of the

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<sup>49</sup> Logo of famous 1990s hip-hop group Wu Tang Clan.

“representations, embodiments, and performances of Blackness” that now exist in the cultural economy “as signifiers of a form of alterity that adorn commodities with a symbolic value that speaks to seemingly authentic notions of difference” (Andrews & Silk, 2011; p. 1632). Hip-hop’s commercial association with a pseudo-authentic blackness is coveted especially by white mainstream consumers; the same consumer base that the sneaker industry aims to sell to. Drawing upon this discussion, I later asked Ken who consumes his hip-hop based products. It led to this interaction that, although it caught me slightly off-guard, provides insight into his definition of The Culture and the complexity of membership in it.

**Brandon:** So do you think that seeing and understanding your work has been different for black people than for white people?

**Ken:** Umm... depends. Really, the split is those who are immersed in The Culture versus those who are not. Because you don’t know what nothing means then. If you walk past and aren’t in The Culture, you don’t understand any of this.

**Brandon:** So what’s being in The Culture?

**Ken:** I mean... it’s just you. It’s who you are. It’s your style of dress, what music you listen to, it’s how you dance, it’s your politics.

**Brandon:** What do you mean by that?

**Ken:** Let me ask you. Can you be a Trump supporter in hip hop?

**Brandon:** There are...

**Ken:** Are there?

**Brandon:** What I’m saying is... you know there’s Trump supporters that listen to rap. It’s played at all the parties. I went to a rap concert last week that was

majority-white, and just going off demographics, I would assume there are at least some that support Trump and like rap at the same time.

**Ken:** Right. And being in The Culture is not saying just that you black. It's not that alone. It's not what music you listen to alone. It's not how you dress alone. That's why I said all those things are encompassed into it. You know... Like so, you know, that's what it is to me. Like it can't be the music alone. It can't be the sneakers alone. It's gotta be all those things embodied.

For Ken, being part of The Culture was not based upon whether or not one was black, but the extent to which one engaged with certain signifiers of blackness, broadly construed. The immediate examples of cultural membership that Ken brought up were style, music, and dance, all three of which are understood to have distinct "black" forms. He also followed the comment of "it's your politics" with a question of whether one can hypothetically support Trump; which is to ask if one can simultaneously consume cultural forms of blackness yet support Trumpism, what Ken viewed as its ideological antithesis. For Ken, the essential part of The Culture was not *being* black, but one's engagement with what he perceived to be *blackness*.

Where do sneakers fit into The Culture? As stated earlier, most participants viewed sneakers currently as an important part of it. Brett viewed sneakers as a subculture within The Culture, saying that they are "a lifestyle, a way of being, a culture within itself". Ken echoed Brett's claim that sneaker culture is a subset of The Culture, placing sneakers within the context of his more elaborate discussion of The Culture. As a follow-up to his quote on hip-hop culture being not just the music but "everything that's around that", I asked if sneakers were included. He states:

**Ken:** Some sneakers, definitely.

**Brandon:** What sneakers? Like what makes a sneaker part of hip-hop culture or not?

**Ken:** Umm... different things. So like what it meant to The Culture. So like Puma Clines, that's what breakers [breakdancers] wore in the 70s. When Run DMC told everyone to take off their Adidas and hold it in the air... That made the Superstar a staple of The Culture.

Ken's used the prolific examples discussed by Turner (2015) to articulate certain moments within The Culture in which sneakers played a role. It was not anything material that exemplified certain sneakers to iconic status, but the role that sneakers played in remarkable moments in black subversion that imbued them with symbolic status. Breakdancing represented the subversion of mainstream dance; as a distinctly black style (Rose, 1994). Run DMC was one of the first global hip-hop groups; a distinctly black style of music (Turner, 2015). These were both broader forms of black cultural symbolic creativity (Gilroy, 1983; Willis, 1990), with sneakers as visible markers of them. What Ken seems to suggest, then, is that a sneaker becomes "part of The Culture" when it can serve as a signifier of a particular moment of The Culture's symbolic creativity in response to mainstream exclusion.

Although his conception of The Culture was not synonymous with black culture, Ken believed that sneakers *started* in what he called black culture. He continued: "What [sneakers] are now, it started in black culture. Would this exist without Jordan? 50% of the shoes that [the industry] is selling now are Jordan 1s. So there ain't no Jordan 1s without Jordan himself." Taylor also believed that sneakers were a large part of The

Culture, but his definition of it was more simplistic than Ken's. When Taylor spoke of The Culture, he was explicitly discussing black culture. Echoing sentiments of Gilroy (1983), he viewed black culture, and subsequently black people, as a primary driver of trends historically and today. Taylor stated that "the African-American community is the number one group in industry and fashion consumption" and that African-Americans are "the number one demographic making Nike rich." I was not able to find recent figures that confirmed or denied this claim, though in 1991, Nike estimated that 87% of its sales were to whites (Vanderbilt, 1998). Yet, Taylor's claim is a common perception amidst the African-American community, most likely deduced from a combination of anecdotal experience or Nike's historical use of blackness in marketing campaigns. He continued, demonstrably making his case by citing prominent examples in the history of sneaker marketing: "who the hell you think was buying (Nike) Air Force One's and pumping them? For Adidas, who did Adidas reach out to? Run DMC. So of course, it's about black culture." For Taylor, signifiers of blackness such as sneakers and hip-hop were essential, at their core, to black culture.

Other participants who invoked The Culture understood it, and sneakers in general, in less explicitly-racial terms. Shane, an African-American, believed sneakers were for all races. The following interaction summarizes his view. After stating that he feels uneasy about wearing his sneakers at his job because of how it shapes peoples' opinions about him, he explains his reasoning:

**Shane:** There will be people that think you care more about your sneakers than your actual job. Even though that's not the case, people still may feel that way,

and will judge you according to that. I'm not that guy, but looking at me, you don't know that. So I can separate that while I'm at work.

**Brandon:** You think race plays a role in how those people perceive you?

**Shane:** Umm... {long pause} – I don't. And the only reason I say that is because sneakers are a worldwide thing. You know, you don't just see sneakers on blacks. You see sneakers on whites, Chinese, everybody. So it's a little different. If all you saw were black people in sneakers then you could kinda see where this is going. But I don't think that's the case.

For Shane, the history of sneakers was less important than who adorns them in the current moment, which he views as people of all races.

Cody, a professional customizer who identifies as white and Filipino but grew up in a neighborhood that he said was 99% black, was one of the foremost participants in favor of the protection and advancement of The Culture. Though he did not provide a complete definition, his understanding of The Culture was more based on a mindset of artistry and creativity than race. When asked who he considers to be part of The Culture, Cody responded "I could care less about the color or the heritage or the religion you are, or whatever. It's just where is your mind at when it comes to the creativity. That's what I'm focused on." He added that the diversity of sneaker culture was a characteristic that he appreciated, stating: "growing up in that community and then when you come to venues like this (sneaker conventions), we're so diverse. It's beautiful being around so many different cultures." Yet when Cody began to harangue about the exploitation of The Culture by the industry<sup>50</sup>, his solution was to elevate black-owned brands and promote

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<sup>50</sup> This is discussed next.

black people to positions of power within the industry. While a viable solution, it indicates that he conceived of an association between The Culture and blackness by proposing that the elevation of black people will coincide with the elevation of The Culture. Without suggesting that Cody latently perceived a synonymy between The Culture and black culture, these comments do suggest that blackness, in some capacity, played a large role in its constitution.

I would argue that the use of blackness in sneaker industry advertising is more subtle than McClintock's (1994) notion of commodity racism, however it has historically exemplified Susan Willis' (1990) point of race by portraying race as a mere style that can be achieved through the consumption. Even advertisements that moved away from using black people have still invoked signifiers of blackness that Ken and Taylor point out. Sneaker industry advertising has "pursued sameness" (Susan Willis, 1990) through the implicit messaging that the consumption and adornment of the same sneakers by all races exemplifies racial solidarity. Yet it has simultaneously "pursued difference" through, at other times, portraying sneakers as having particular meaning in the context of blackness. For some, like Shane and Cody, this pursuit of sameness has been the predominant "decoding" (Hall, 1980). For others, such as Ken and Taylor, the pursuit of differences is the most apparent in popular culture and industry advertising, which accounts for their view of sneakers as distinctly black despite the fact that they are worn by all races. This is not to suggest that sneakers are property of black culture, not to be encroached upon by non-black individuals. A culture itself is an untraceable amalgam, let alone the fluid and evolving meanings that a certain culture ascribes arbitrarily to certain goods. However, it is the commercial construction of an association between sneakers and blackness,

embedded through signs into hegemonic ideology, that have real life effects on how individuals understand sneakers and the people who wear them. The ambiguity in defining The Culture demonstrates this.

Wayne's thoughts on The Culture reflected this view, bridging the gap between those who viewed sneakers as associated with blackness and those who did not. His view was that there was not a relationship between sneakers and blackness, but the industry has attempted to create one in order to sell shoes. Since he was my last interview and had driven our conversation towards race and blackness, I asked Wayne, an African-American individual customizer, his opinion on this debate that had arisen in previous interviews. It led to the nuanced discussion below:

**Brandon:** Do think that today, sneakers are a diverse and racially-inclusive thing, or do you think that there's a relationship between blackness and sneakers?

**Wayne:** Nah man. I mean you could say that they use blackness to sell sneakers, 100%. But like the shoe game, how it really is, is very inclusive in itself. No matter who you are, race, creed, background, it doesn't matter. As you see in here (sneaker convention), you'll see all types of people. But the commercial side of it is something different.

**Brandon:** So the commercial side being the sneaker industry?

**Wayne:** Yeah exactly.

**Brandon:** So what are your thoughts on that? The role of race on the commercial side?

**Wayne:** They use The Culture to sell, like any business. But we all know they do what they do to profit. Like there's no other reason for the things they do.



Whether good or bad, their goal is to profit. I mean that's how capitalist society works. That's how it is, you can't really change that.

Wayne was able to make a distinction between how he perceived sneaker culture in reality and how he perceived its representation. His comments support the view that sneakers, by nature, have no more of an association with the black community than any other community; just as black people have no inherent predisposition to adulate sneakers. However, the representation of sneakers within black culture does not reflect an essential link, it actively creates one. As Wilson's (1996) findings suggest, this representation becomes internalized and shapes the consumption practices of African-Americans. Some of these internalized discourses reproduced by the industry – such as ghettocentrism, the myth of black physical superiority, the myth of a black fixation on frivolous consumption, among others – were undoubtedly harmful (Andrews & Silk, 2011). Yet morality is not the concern for the sneaker industry; selling sneakers is, and those discourses were effective in positioning sneakers in a commercially-convenient way. Wayne understood this representation to be constructed by the industry due to the profitability of blackness. Wayne portrayed this as an inevitability, regardless of the moral implications. I attempted to ask his opinion on this process:

**Brandon:** You said whether good or bad, it happens [the industry using race to sell sneaker]. Do you think that it is good or bad that they do this?

**Wayne:** I think it's good that they get involved. But you can't always predict or guess the outcome of what something is gonna do. They're just doing their jobs. Sometimes I think they represent blackness well and it helps the community, black community. But sometimes, like, they exploit minorities to sell shoes and

stuff. But that's all part of the business. People buy these things. People have opportunities to either buy or not buy these things. Honestly, you have to hold yourself accountable. That's what I do.

For Wayne, blackness and The Culture was certainly a coveted asset for the industry. The manifestation could be positive or negative, but it was ultimately up to the consumer to make the normative judgement. For Wayne, it was not a few individual actors who are to blame for the use of blackness for profit. Instead, it was a systematic, realistic, and rational business practice in a capitalist society that too-often prioritizes profit at the expense of virtue.

Following Wayne, when I will reference The Culture, I understand it not as defined solely by blackness; nor an entity that completely transcends race. Instead, I conceptualize The Culture as what Willis' (1990) termed a 'proto-community' (p. 141). Willis (1990) contends that late capitalism's stylistic aestheticization provides grounds for the creation of new imagined communities – which he called proto-communities – to be organized around certain aesthetics. He argues that instead of being organized around the objective factors of organic communities such as workplace or neighborhood, proto-communities are organized around the eclectic, less-material subjectivities of individuals who share similar “styles, fashions, interests, empathies, positions, and passions” (p. 141). Beyond just having common interests, membership into these proto-communities may rely on, as Willis writes, “shared cultural interests and aspirations, shared interests in removing blocks to them, [and] shared interests in increasing control over cultural materials and conditions” (p. 142). Thinking through Willis' conception (and despite Taylor's view of The Culture as black culture), the definitions provided by participants

seemed to include more subjective factors than identity; such as style, politics, interests, empathies, and concern for the advancement of The Culture. I will proceed with a definition that meshes the proto-community with race: referring to The Culture as an abstract community of individuals – predominantly black, working-class, and urban, but consisting of all identity factors – that is organized around the interests, dispositions, and embodiments of signifiers of blackness and a perceived black aesthetic.

Wayne's critique of the industry's exploitative use of blackness exemplifies a theme that has implicitly and explicitly been present throughout this entire analysis: the perception that the relationship between The Culture and the sneaker industry was iniquitous and non-reciprocal. This perception echoes Lury's (2011) discussion of the pseudo-relationship that brands intend to create with what they perceive to be their consumer base, but ultimately benefit the brand exponentially more than the consumers. According to participants, sneaker brands such as Nike and Adidas, as well as the other 'hot' fashion brands such as Gucci, Louis Vuitton, and Supreme, would not even exist if it were not for The Culture. Participants indicated that the sneaker industry would not be as successful as it is today without blackness. Whether it was Taylor's attribution of Adidas's success since the 1980s to Run DMC, Shane's attribution of New Balance's success to the opinion leaders of his urban community, or Ken's attribution of Nike's success to Michael Jordan, participants believed that the industry relied on blackness to establish its market share. Even today, on the consumption side, participants viewed black people as consistent buyers of sneakers and athletic apparel. On the production side, participants viewed black people as playing a role in sustaining industry profit

through endorsements and word-of-mouth ambassadorship. As Wayne put it, “that’s why they use blackness: they know it sells.” The issue for participants was not that blackness was used by the industry. Rather, it was the perception that The Culture and black people were gaining little to nothing in return for this use. The use of blackness was understandable for participants, as long as The Culture in some way benefitted as well. According to Ken, this currently was not the case:

**Ken:** In the past, these brands wouldn’t touch us... Because they didn’t understand The Culture. I mean, now it’s flipped though, because what you see is industry and corporate entities taking advantage of us. Now they use The Culture to sell their products.

**Brandon:** So do you think the sneaker industry is part of this exploitation of The Culture?

**Ken:** Umm... I don’t know if its exploitation. It’s just... if you not usable, you not useful. So it’s a give and take, right. But the caveat to that is, how does The Culture benefit from the industry? It’s gotta be both ways.

**Brandon:** Do you think it is?

**Ken:** Sometimes. But it depends what day it is. Most days, no. They don’t give credit where it’s due.

By saying that “in the past, these brands wouldn’t touch us,” Ken is referring to The Culture, a community affected by the broader exclusion of those on the low side of the cultural hierarchy (Willis, 1990). After the hierarchy’s collapse, Ken viewed those formerly on the elite side of the hierarchy as “taking advantage of us” without “[giving] credit where it’s due.” This is further justification for the boundaries that those within

The Culture attempt to enforce. Still, to be used by the industry may have been a slight annoyance to participants, but it was not viewed as materially detrimental. The main issue, though, was the fear that The Culture's loyal consumption and ubiquitous visibility in industry advertising was only propagating the success of an industry that prioritized corporate profits at the expense of the interests of people from The Culture, many of whom are socially-marginalized. That, without a doubt, was detrimental.

Considering the merits of the critique, Ken and the other participants have a strong case. Beyond the history of the sneaker industry's ambivalent invocation of race as described earlier, contemporary events suggest that not much has changed. In the same month that Nike signed Colin Kaepernick for his renowned protests of police brutality and institutional racism, founder Phil Knight donated \$2.5 million to the Republican Party that has made the demonization of Kaepernick a routine theme of their nationwide messaging (Wilson, Nov. 4, 2018). Under Armour CEO Kevin Plank described Donald Trump as "an asset" to the country in 2017 (to which Stephen Curry, Under Armour's largest athlete endorsement and frequent target for Trump's attacks, responded "I agree with that description, if you remove the 'e-t'" [Bieler, Feb. 8, 2017; para. 2]). Adidas came under fire in early 2019 for commemorating Black History Month with an all-white pair of sneakers for \$180 (Hsu & Paton, Feb. 7, 2019), a few years after also receiving criticism for releasing a \$350 pair of sneakers that featured literal shackles (Considine, June 20, 2012). These instances all pale in comparison to the allegations of sweatshop production practices that exploit lower-class women and children in developing countries around the world (Clancy, 2016). Even if the sneaker industry can positively shape racial

representation in some ways, only a cursory-level investigation makes it clear that the industry's engagement with race is problematic in various other ways.

In addition, participants viewed the industry as complicit in the gentrification of sneaker culture and the incentivization of the conformist hypebeast era. What was especially evident in participants' characterization of hypebeasts was the racial overtones. Simply put, most hypebeasts and re-sellers were said to be white. Most members of The Culture, on the other hand, were black. Therefore, not only were hypebeasts not from The Culture, but they were attempting to profit from The Culture. Perhaps the racial dynamics were unbeknownst to hypebeasts, who may understand race to be a mere choice and style and sneakers one of the commodities in which one could 'choose' their race (Susan Willis, 1990). This ideology would be a product of the sneaker industry's Benetton-esque advertisements that, while signifying the exotic fascination with blackness, suggest that sneakers are a way to 'achieve' it and become 'cool' (Back & Quaade, 1993; Giroux, 1993; McGuigan, 2006). Regardless of the origin of white hypebeasts' interest in sneakers and The Culture, participants believed that hypebeasts had no communal tie to The Culture and had, at best, a superficial understanding of it. As a result, hypebeasts had no regard for The Culture's artistic sanctity, nor the impact of their practices on it. This explains the earlier discussion of the hypebeast pursuit of the latest 'hot' trends, perceived as driving sneaker culture away from individuality and towards conformity. The hypebeast practice of re-selling was making sneakers more exclusive and only accessible to those with the will and the means to pay exuberant prices for sneakers that, in the past, were more reasonably priced. Because people from The Culture were often working class, many did not have the means to purchase the latest sneakers. As a result,

they were unable to participate in sneaker culture, while those with greater means had the advantage of being able to afford the latest sneakers.

Participants' critique of the industry was that they understood the dynamic of predominant-white hypebeasts and re-sellers boxing out predominantly-black original members of The Culture. Instead of the industry taking steps to alleviate this issue and find ways to make the latest sneakers more appealing and accessible to members of The Culture, participants believed that the industry was catering to the hypebeasts in numerous ways, including: making sneakers that resembled older sneakers that were popular among hypebeasts, releasing sneakers in limited quantities, superfluously raising prices, opening outlet stores in high-income districts, stealing designs from customizers in The Culture without proper compensation, and acknowledging and abetting famous hypebeasts on social media. To the participants, the industry historically used The Culture to sell to those outside of it that were fascinated by it. However, when The Culture began to suffer as a result, participants viewed the industry as turning a cold shoulder. In response to my question of who Ken thought the industry was selling The Culture to, he smiled, pointed behind me to the center floor of the convention, and responded: "these young white kids running around." For participants, the industry chose the gentrifiers over the gentrified.

The "young white kids" that Ken brings up had a visible presence at the second convention. They also served as a convenient example for participants to literally point to as they attempted to explain the racial dynamics of sneaker culture. When I was at the second convention, about 25% of the attendees were white, middle-school-to-high-school-aged boys. It was not so much their race or age that made them stand out. Rather,

it was their behavior of (somewhat obnoxiously) asking each attendee if they would like to buy a multi-hundred-dollar pair of sneakers from them, while accompanied by their middle-aged parents throughout the process. For participants, this represented the degradation of sneaker culture and its move away from being rooted in The Culture. Sneaker conventions were originally a place for The Culture to convene around their love for sneakers. These conventions were sacred places for the community to celebrate sneaker culture, whether that be in the form of buying and selling sneakers, showing off the latest models or customizations, adding to their collections, or just meeting up to associate and network with other sneakerheads. Now, it was feared that conventions were just a place for hypebeasts to find the latest ‘hot’ trends to conform to; or even worse, to try to get a head start on a future ‘hot’ trends by discovering what The Culture was wearing, knowing it would eventually become diffused (Clarke, 1971). As Cody pointed out, referring to the sneaker conventions: “me and my boy were just talking about how we used to love these venues, but they’ve changed. If you look around now, like 6 out of 7 tables have the same shoes.”

Conventions were also feared to be turning into a space for re-sellers to easily find individuals so desperate for a certain pair of sneakers that they would buy them for the heightened re-sale price. Even more problematic was the belief that these re-sellers, who were mostly white, were seeking to profit specifically off of African-Americans, guided by the perception that African-Americans have a pathological fixation on owning sneakers. This perception, of course, was constructed by industry representation of sneakers and blackness. In my observation, the “young white kids” Ken referred to were specifically targeting African-Americans, as if the kids viewed them as the easiest source



for a quick profit. The manner in which they approached African-Americans was also striking. On three separate occasions, I had interviews interrupted by a young kid cutting a participant off mid-sentence to ask them if they liked a pair of shoes and wanted to buy them, and moving on to the next ‘target’ without a word when the participants said no. Even more striking was the instance of when a participant told me, after being interrupted by the kid trying to sell him a sneaker, that he witnessed the kid buy that same sneaker from the table of the participant’s friend. After hearing the price of the sneaker, the participant said he saw the kid get money from his parents to buy the sneakers. Then, the kid tried to sell that same pair of sneakers to *other* tables at the same convention for \$100 more than he (well, his parents) paid for it, thinking no one would notice! The parents seemed to watch the entire time with a smile, as if they were assisting their child through a crash course on how to be a young entrepreneur. For the participants however, and in my own opinion, it was a blatant disrespect for the convention and The Culture for which sneakers and conventions are meaningful.

If, as Ken suggests, The Culture is really what is being sold by the industry to these “young white kids” and others outside of it, then the way the conventions were designed provided a ripe setting for outsiders to consume The Culture. However, as described earlier, the atmosphere of each convention did not replicate elements of The Culture as it truly exists. It replicated its representation as constructed through industry advertising and popular culture. This replication of The Culture was expressed through the convention’s set-up with the same racial ambiguity that was present of some participant’s definitions, often using certain elements to signify blackness to approach, but ultimately avoid, an explicit invocation of black culture as The Culture. The live DJ

playing rap music established the connection to hip-hop culture<sup>51</sup>. The graffiti on the walls not only alluded to the origins of sneaker culture in artistry and rebellious originality, but created a feeling of being in the inner-city. The basketball apparel worn by attendees and organizers, along with the NBA Street video game, conveyed the centrality of (street) basketball to The Culture. Overall, the message exuded by the sneaker convention design was that by attending, one could, at least for a moment, immerse themselves in The Culture. This immersion was only in the fascinating parts of The Culture though, the ones that they've seen represented in popular culture. The less-appealing parts inner-city blackness – such as the ubiquitous poverty, racial discrimination, and lack of opportunity – could be ignored, masked behind the hyperreal, yet marketable, signifiers of The Culture.

It is within the context described above that the importance of street-level sneaker customization makes sense. Especially for 'purist' members of the culture, individual and professional customization on the street level provided a way The Culture – along with the depth of affect that used to accompany the sneakers they consumed and created – to be re-inscribed into sneaker culture. Customization can be understood as an act of symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990) in resistance to an industry has chosen to cater to hypebeasts and re-sellers at the expense of The Culture. By creating and designing their own sneakers, members of The Culture could own sneakers that they like without having to purchase exclusive releases from the industry, at an arbitrarily-raised price, from re-sellers who aim only to profit from the commodities that only those from The Culture

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<sup>51</sup> The DJ at the first convention encouraging requests from the “original days” of the 1980s/90s was an interesting metaphor, as hip-hop music has undergone a similar racial transition, or gentrification, as sneakers.

truly appreciate. Through customization, individuals could maintain the importance of original artistry and subvert the conformity that the industry practices described earlier incentivize. Customization was also a way for The Culture, perceived to be on the verge of being displaced, to remain a part of sneaker culture. This further explains the relevance of customizing sneakers in a way to express group identity, such as Wayne's "BLACKLIVESMATTER" sneakers, Ken's Wu Tang sneakers, Justin's African-American and Latino cartoon sneakers, and Shane's inner-city inspired New Balance sneakers. In aggregate, despite their slightly different areas of it, these designs were created to signify recognition of and membership in The Culture. Darren and Taylor's use of customized sneakers as philanthropy to inner-city African-American youth is even more meaningful when considering the context of the industry's use of blackness and its subsequent abandonment of acknowledging the issues that are detrimental to it. In sum, street customization was meaningful because it originated in The Culture, is practiced by those in The Culture, and works towards the interests of The Culture.

Despite the bleak narrative expressed regarding the relationship between The Culture and the industry, participants had optimism for an improved relationship in the future. Mainly, participants called for the industry to finally acknowledge and find ways to benefit The Culture. Cody suggested that the industry needs to update their approach, for their own good and for the good of The Culture, arguing: "these multi-million, multi-billion dollar companies do some good things, but they need to go back to the drawing board and see what they can do to get The Culture back to being a part of it." One of the most effective methods of ensuring that The Culture is represented in the industry, for participants, was for the industry to hire qualified members of The Culture to positions of

influence. This was a solution similar to one that Willis (1990) provided, who contended that a simple way of atoning for commercialism's use of the logics of low culture is "to seek to give everyday culture back to its owners and let them develop it. Let them really control the conditions, production and consumption of their own symbolic resources!" (p. 130, exclamation in original).

Darren, echoing Willis, summarized the disconnect between the sneaker industry and The Culture in stating: "at the end of the day, with a lot of these brands, their collections are based on The Culture of the streets, but they're not run by the people in the streets." As described earlier, industry employment or collaboration was the goal for many street customizers, despite the anti-industry attitudes. The caveat, however, was that customizers needed to actually benefit from the knowledge they provided to the industry. Cody placed the onus on these cultural intermediaries from the street to not sell out, but to use their talent to protect and promote the culture. He explained:

These people sitting in corporate offices not making the right decisions... People from The Culture know what people like and would want. But I want to see someone who is not budging. Someone who won't give it up that easy. But like, tells them [the industry] "let's sit down, and let's talk about what this shoe can do for The Culture moving forward." There's a whole lot of answers we would need from the bigger-ups, but I think if we could get that to go, then I think we'll be on the right track.

Taylor's approach to his initiative of providing customized sneaker to inner-city youth who improve their grades was similar to what Cody called for. He did not view the

industry as his enemy, but as a potential ally that could use their resources to help him elevate and spread his mission. He stated:

So my thing is, I want to always have control over this. I'm never going to sign a piece of paper where they tell me how to narrate my story. But if, once again, I'm not an athlete, I'm not a rapper, I'm not rich. So if these people will not help me push my agenda and the agenda of the people that I represent, right... Why not? Why not? I mean... my thing is if Nike is understanding that the number one demographic of people that are making Nike rich or African Americans and they want to come back and grab key African Americans who they feel like are influencers, why not? But you're not going to change who I am.

As long as he did not have to relinquish control over his ideas, Taylor was open to using the industry for the betterment of his community. For Taylor, every benefit that could come from working with the proverbial enemy was still a benefit that could have material effects.

Another solution was for consumers to support street-level customizers and businesses. Cody suggested buying sneakers from those who have the interests of The Culture in mind, such as black-owned business. He reasoned: "If you're gonna be out here buying shoes, you could at least make sure your money and everything will be going towards a good cause." A good cause, in this case, being the enrichment of The Culture. Similarly, Wayne argued that because of the influence of The Culture on the industry, the industry should be pressured into conducting business as if they had an obligation to The Culture. He demonstrated his point with a hypothetical:

Like, if I went on the street and said “okay I got a bunch of Kaepernick shirts, a bunch of Kaepernick shoes” for my own design and then sold them and then donated the money to Kaepernick.... The industry could do the same thing. I just don’t have the resources. That’s what they could do, just do it on a more massive level. It could be a positive thing.

For Mike, the resources that the industry possesses could also be an advantage for The Culture if the industry would finally make The Culture a priority. Overall, participants believed that considering the perspective of The Culture would be beneficial not only for The Culture itself, but for the overall success of the industry. Customization, then, was both a potential way to creatively subvert the industry and a way for The Culture to get a foot in the door and improve the industry for the good of the people that it has an obligation to uplift.

#### 4.4 Summary of Findings

In summary, my findings suggest that sneaker customization can be understood as a form of “symbolic creativity” (Willis, 1990) through which common consumers imbue customized sneakers with various meanings. These meanings were a creation of common, everyday consumers, assembled in response to, in accordance with, and in spite of an industry that has infused sneakers with meanings that are commercially favorable. To summarize the answer to my first research question regarding the reasons for engaging in sneaker customization, participants customized in order to pursue a distinct individuality amidst a consumer culture that they (negatively) perceived to be increasingly conformist. Customized sneakers were also an object that stimulated emotion and affect in

participants, such as self-esteem, nostalgia, therapy, and the communication of the feeling of achievement. While most participants who customized sneakers considered their sneakers art and themselves as artists, participants also perceived a dichotomy between those who customized for the pure artistry and those who customized only to make money. Even for participants who both considered themselves artists and sold their “artwork”, customization as artwork was perceived as more honorable than customization as business. For some participants, customized sneakers were also utilized as a form of social philanthropy; used to give back to their community, signal political commitments, and identify themselves as a member of social and political groups. These findings answer my second research questions regarding the meanings constructed through sneaker customization, and assist in answering my third question regarding the use of sneaker customization in constructing identity and guiding consumer behavior.

The significance of sneaker customization was also apparent through its positioning in the trajectory of sneaker culture. In most cases, customized sneakers were signifiers that an individual was a purist (meaning they had a true passion for sneakers and individuality) rather than a hypebeast (one whose interest in sneakers is only to make money, gain social media influence, or impress others). This was important because participants perceived the increasing prevalence of hypebeasts as detrimental to sneaker culture, as they amplified conformity, displaced purists through tactics such as re-selling, and degraded the sanctity of sneaker culture. Additionally, participants viewed the sneaker and fashion industry as being complicit in the evolution towards commodification and conformity by appealing to hypebeasts at the expense of The Culture from which sneaker culture historically derived. As a result, sneaker

customization on the street level was understood as one of the few ways to consume something “original”, while simultaneously supporting those from The Culture and subverting the industry that exploits it. Despite the definition of The Culture itself being elusive and partially a commercial construction, participants viewed sneaker customization as an alternative to the industry and a way to progressively retain and represent the prideful elements of The Culture for which all participants considered themselves a part of. These findings further answer my second and third question regarding the role of sneaker customization in shaping consumer identity, meaning, and behavior. Additionally, these findings answer my fourth question regarding the broader cultural, economic, political, and ideological forces in which sneaker customization is meaningful as an exercise of consumer agency and symbolic creativity<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> See the Thematic Summaries chart in Appendix A for a one-sentence summary of each theme, as well as the specific research questions engaged in each theme.



## CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion

### 5.1 Discussion of Findings

I have argued throughout this analysis for sneaker customization to be understood as a form of symbolic creativity. Sneaker customization is overwhelmingly consistent with Willis' (1990) theorizing on how those from the common culture engage in the practice of making meaning through everyday objects, such as the sneaker. This art form, as participants literally conceived it, has been a subtle-yet-significant part of sneaker culture since before Willis' book *Common Culture* was even released. Contrary to what I believed going into the project, sneaker customization on the street level was not a new practice. Rather, it has only been highlighted due to the collapse of the high/low distinction of artistic style, and the subsequent amplification of the low cultural style by the elite. Willis was correct that this collapse of a cultural hierarchy, while democratizing culture to groups who traditionally were excluded from appreciating it, would eventually lead to culture industries "dipping down" into low cultural aesthetics in the pursuit of profit. However, my analysis of sneaker culture identified a dynamic that extends Willis' thinking: the phenomenon of the low culture not only confidently and explicitly viewing their symbolic creativity as art (often politically-charged art), but protected their art from the potential debasement of those from high culture with the same vigor that those of high culture once protected their art from those of low culture. The hierarchy did not collapse completely; in this way, it merely flipped. Street-level customization, especially from customizers that are a part of The Culture (or, as we can conceptualize it in this context, common culture) was seen as the most legitimate and pure form of art, and therefore had a higher sign value (Baudrillard, 1983). Products and customizations from

the industry (the former gatekeepers of high fashion design) were designated as having a lesser sign value by members of The Culture. The industry reliance on low cultural styles, while in some instances constituted exploitation, also empowered the stylistic confidence of those in The Culture to believe that the sanctity of their symbolic creativity was worth protecting.

I want to be careful not to suggest that The Culture being wary of hypebeast and industry embracement is the same as traditional elites being wary of traditional low culture. There are significant differences. First, low cultural styles were often created as a response to being excluded from high culture. Second, if those from low culture desired to be a part of high culture, it was because high culture held power in society and becoming culturally refined could lead to upward mobility. The reason that the industry wants to embrace The Culture has nothing to do with this rational desire for social status; the sole purpose is for the industry to profit from the styles created in response to them. This leads to the third difference, which is that The Culture's protective impulse from The Industry is rooted in a history of exploitation and mistreatment by the Industry. The protective impulse of high culture from low culture was rooted in – at best – pure snobbery, and – at worst – classism, racism, colonialism, etc. Overall, despite this traditional high/low cultural hierarchy collapsing, the issues that arise when high and low cultures intermingle cannot transcend the fact that those of the former high culture still have power, while those of the former low culture do not.

## 5.2 Personal Reflection on the Data

Throughout this analysis, one may get the sense that I oscillate between a positive and negative outlook towards the trajectory of sneaker customization and the

contemporary consumption patterns in which it lies. Unlike other scholars of postmodernity, I do not feel to the need to designate these cultural patterns comprehensively good or bad. I think each unit of analysis harbors elements that merit optimism and pessimism, for which I will state each clearly. I view the collapse of the high/low cultural hierarchy and the subsequent democratization of culture as a positive development, especially due to its capability to allow for more equitable representation and appreciation. However, I fear that much of the sudden “appreciation” of low culture by the industry is at best insincere, and at worst, exploitation that is harmful to both cultural resource allocation and representation of low culture. I view sneaker customization as an expressive, cathartic, and important method of everyday symbolic creativity and meaning-making, especially on the street-level, though I fear that its commodification could increasingly drive it away from meaningful artistry and towards austere, depersonalized market logics. However, who am I to chastise, for example, a talented, lower-class, inner-city African-American artist – who faces such mitigating barriers in other institutions and career paths – for trying to make money and obtain power over her destiny while doing something she has a true passion for, all in the name of some intuitive desire of mine to protect something as abstract as the sanctity of artistic sneaker culture? The career opportunities that sneaker customization provides are incontrovertible, especially for those from The Culture who may have little else to bank on, even if the chances of true success are slim and romanticized.

I was more partial in this analysis to individuality, though I would be naïve to believe that participants were as prone to pursuing pure individuality as they said they were. Due to the nature of my method of interviewing, conformity never received its

proportionate representation. Conformity is taboo, and for participants to admit that they were in any way conformist required a certain level of vulnerability and introspection that was unrealistic for me to expect. Yet, in their explication of their consumption practices and latent throughout their comments, it was clear that participants were often guilty of what they accused conformists of doing: consuming and customizing to impress others, and caring about what others thought. Surely, some of the participants I interviewed that paraded individuality in their sneakers would be accused of being hypebeasts by other participants. My point is that consumption and human identity is more complex than can be expressed through a binary of individualist or conformist, and all consumers, consciously or unconsciously, fluctuate between both in different periods and contexts.

I am sympathetic to plight of The Culture over that of the industry. A large part of the reason The Culture was formulated was the exclusion and discrimination at the hands of industries, whom often historically were created by those in high culture to produce for and be consumed by others in high culture. The high-cultural commodities that these industries sold were historically produced by those of low culture – primarily the working class – who, in addition to being exploited and alienated, could not even participate in the consumption of the products that they made with their own hands. For the industry to now re-appropriate the low cultural subjectivities that were molded in opposition to it, and sell that re-appropriation back to members of that same low culture in a debased and disingenuous manner, is itself an exemplar of the contradictory and shameless nature of late capitalist commerce. However, as participants pointed out, the industry use of The Culture is a reality that shows no signs of slowing down. Willis (1990) recognized this as well, stating that: “commerce and consumerism have helped to release a profane

explosion of everyday symbolic life and activity. The genie of common culture is out of the bottle – let out by commercial carelessness. Not stuffing it back in, but seeing what wishes may be granted, should be the stuff of our imagination” (p. 26). Willis’ point that the most realistic course of action for individual consumers is to symbolically create, continuing to make new meanings out of their experiences. My participant Justin raised the same idea, arguing that, in the face of industry exploitation and recuperation of customizers’ designs and aesthetics, customizers “just gotta do bigger and better things. That’s just the name of the game when it comes to art. It’s changing every day. People gotta evolve.” While broader structural and cultural changes are preferred, a silver lining to the plight of customizers is that these harmful processes will continue to push artists to innovate and push forward artistic creativity in the service of explicitly or implicitly subverting power.

### 5.3 Implications for PCS

As stated in the introduction, I am not a “sneakerhead.” Nor did I decide upon this project because I am particularly interested in sneakers or sneaker customization for its own sake. However, I am interested in examining the ways in which meaning and identity is both created through ordinary cultural practices and shaped by the same processes that make its construction possible. As Andrews (2002) states, “a cultural entity cannot be defined independently of its existence with the context. [A] practice does not exist apart from the forces of the context that constitute it as what it is” (p. 113). In this thesis, I have explicated the trend of sneaker customization as a form of symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990) that is influenced by, while simultaneously influencing, the broader context of late capitalism, specifically identifying postmodernism, post-Fordism,

and contemporary consumer culture as processes with particular relevance. Andrews (2008) argues that contextualizing an empirical site cannot be done uncritically, but must analyze the ways in which corporeal practices, discourses, and subjectivities “become organized, represented, and experienced in relation to the operations of social power” (p. 54). For this reason, I have also located the magnitude, effect, and directionality of power within sneaker customization. I will now make this dynamic clear.

Power has historically operated in the traditional top-down sense when discussing the exploitative relationship between The Culture and the industry. It is the result of a high/low cultural dichotomy that, while no longer dominating the cultural landscape, has a legacy that is still engrained in the minds of those marginalized and misrepresented by it. Even the recent concern over sneaker gentrification had a relatively explicit, easily-identifiable dynamic of racial and class dominance. However, when discussing the meanings of both sneakers and The Culture that sneakers were a part of for participants, the power dynamics became more complicated. Instead, power was diffused and internalized, revealing itself to operate through ideology that largely is constructed through sign-manipulation for the profitability of the manipulators (Althusser, 1971; Baudrillard, 1983). These empty signifiers – such as ‘blackness’, ‘sneaker culture’, ‘individuality’, etc – were shaped by industry forces in ways that benefitted them. Mainly, this shaping was conducted by industries, through advertising and popular culture representation, of the creation of an ideal form for a person of a certain identity group to aspire to, with the subtle implication that one could reach it through ceaseless consumption. In many cases, this interpellation was successful as these ideologies were internalized by individuals, shaping their consumption practices and how they understood

themselves in relation to it. In other cases, this notion was challenged by participants, often through the symbolic imbuelement of oppositional ideologies onto sneakers, the same commodities made popular by industry sign manipulation.

This creation of oppositional meaning relates to how Hall viewed cultural forms as not solely being wielded as resistance to power, but as an important avenue for the potential conscientization (Procter, 2004). This reflects the mission of Physical Cultural Studies, which, after identifying the operations of power, is to strategically disseminate “potentially empowering forms of knowledge and understanding”, seeking to “illuminate, and intervene into, sites of physical cultural injustice and inequity” (p. 54). My goal with this project was not to designate sneakers, sneaker customization, or the sneaker industry as good or bad. Rather, it was to examine how sneaker customization, and the stakeholders within it, are shaped by broader cultural processes, logics, and ideologies. I am not naïve enough to believe that this project will radically transform anyone’s consumption habits, their love (or hate) for sneakers, or their views of the sneaker industry. Nor will it meaningfully deconstruct the powerful, culturally-established notion that identity and consumption are linked, and that one cannot simply exist as a being without buying. However, it is my hope that the knowledge produced in this thesis will contribute to the conscientization of consumers in understanding the operations of power latent within their consumption practices, and the conscientization of all individuals in common cultures to highlight the significance and potential of everyday, ordinary, symbolic creativity.

## Appendix A: Thematic Summaries

<u>Theme</u>	<u>One-Sentence Theme Summary</u>	<u>Research Questions Engaged in Theme</u>
Individuality vs Conformity	Participants used sneaker customization as a way to express their individuality amidst what they perceived to be increasing conformity in sneaker culture.	1- Reasons for customization 2- Meanings of customization 3- Influence of customization 4- Customization in context
Sneaker as an Affective Commodity	Customized sneakers stimulated in individuals the affective associations of self-esteem, nostalgia, therapy, and achievement.	1- Reasons for customization 2- Meanings of customization 3- Influence of customization 4- Customization in context
Art vs Business	Sneaker customization is a form of art in which customizers took pride, but participants feared that the prevalence of selling customized work was detracting from the artistry that made the practice of sneaker consumption special.	1- Reasons for customization 2- Meanings of customization 3- Influence of customization
Sneakers as Social Philanthropy	Customized sneakers were used by participants to ‘give back’ to their community, signal political commitments, and identify themselves as a member of social and political groups.	1- Reasons for customization 2- Meanings of customization 3- Influence of customization 4- Customization in context
Purists vs Hypebeasts	Sneaker purists are those who appreciate sneakers as a worthy end, while hypebeasts were those who used sneakers as a means to an end (such as profit, influence, or acceptance).	3- Influence of customization 4- Customization in context
Customized Sneaker in the Social Media Age	Social media has led to greater visibility for sneaker customizers that has generated career opportunities, but it is also the medium through which hypebeasts are incentivized to exploit sneakers and the industry copies the latest designs from talented customizers.	3- Influence of customization 4- Customization in context
Street vs Industry Customization	Though industry customization has its slight advantages, it was perceived as a reactive appropriation of street customization that has existed for decades and is more symbolic, legitimate within sneaker culture, and provides greater artistic freedom to cultivate individuality.	1- Reasons for customization 2- Meanings of customization 3- Influence of customization 4- Customization in context
Racial Politics of Sneaker Customization	Sneaker customization was perceived as a way to promote and protect The Culture from a sneaker industry that uses The Culture to sell sneakers but provides no benefit to it in return.	1- Reasons for customization 2- Meanings of customization 3- Influence of customization 4- Customization in context



## Appendix B: Sample Characteristics

### B.1 Participant Breakdown

<u>Pseudonym*</u>	<u>Gender**</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Ethnicity***</u>	<u>Experience with Customization****</u>
Amber	Female	33	Black	Individual, Professional
Brett	Male	34	Black	Individual
Charles	Male	23	Pakistani	Industry
Cody	Male	27	White, Filipino	Professional
Darren	Male	24	Black	Professional
Justin	Male	31	Black	Professional
Ken	Male	34	Black	Individual, Professional
Lance	Male	21	Black	Industry
Nicole	Female	21	Black	Professional
Paul	Male	38	Latino	Professional
Shane	Male	36	Black	Industry
Steven	Male	23	Black, White	Professional
Taylor	Male	34	Black	Professional
Thomas	Male	27	Black, White	Individual, Professional
Wayne	Male	22	Black	Individual

\* All names used throughout thesis are pseudonyms

\*\* I decided to assume gender, and only ask if there was any doubt. I feared that asking one's gender could potentially offend an individual from the community I was speaking with.

\*\*\* Participant ethnicity was self-identified

\*\*\*\* As discussed in the thesis:

- Individual referred customization done for one's self by one's self or professional
- Professional referred to customization of products with the intent to sell them
- industry referred to customization done for one's self through online industry platforms

### B.2 Racial Breakdown

<u>Race</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Percentage of Sample</u>
Black	10	66.6%
Latino	1	6.66%
Pakistani	1	6.66%
Mixed (Black/White)	2	13.33%
Mixed (White/Filipino)	1	6.66%
Total	15	100%

### A.3 Gender Breakdown

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Percentage of Sample</u>
Male	13	86.66%

Female	2	13.33%
Total	15	100%

#### B.4 Customization Experience Breakdown

<u>Experience with Customization</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Percentage of Sample</u>
Individual	2	13.33%
Professional	7	46.66%
Industry	3	20%
Individual and Professional	3	20%
Total	15	100%

## Appendix C: IRB Consent Form



Initials: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Institutional Review Board

1204 Marie Mount Hall • 7814 Regents Drive • College Park, MD 20742 • 301-405-4212 • [irb@umd.edu](mailto:irb@umd.edu)

### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

<b>Project Title</b>	<i>Mass Footwear Customization and Postmodern Consumer Culture</i>
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	<i>This research is being conducted by Brandon Wallace at the University of Maryland, College Park. We are inviting you to participate in this research project because you have customized a pair of athletic footwear in the past 10 years. The purpose of this research project is to understand the reasons and motivations of consumers when customizing athletic footwear.</i>
<b>Procedures</b>	<i>The procedures involve an interview about your experience customizing footwear. The interview should take 20-30 minutes and can be conducted in-person, over-the-phone, or via Skype. Interviews will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. Prior to the interview, participants will be encouraged to send a photograph of a pair (or pairs) of shoes that they have customized and be willing to discuss them during the interview.</i>
<b>Potential Risks and Discomforts</b>	<i>There are no known risks for participating in this research. There may be a small chance of minor, unforeseeable risks from participating in this research study. Although planned interview topics are minimally invasive and harmless, interviews may include discussion of sensitive information that may be relevant to customized shoes. You do not have to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. There is an unlikely risk of the potential for the loss/breach of confidentiality, although measures will be taken to prevent this.</i>
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	<i>There are no direct benefits to participants. However, possible benefits include the chance for participants to express their customization experience and designs with someone genuinely interested. We hope that, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the reasons and motivations of how consumers use mass customization of athletic footwear, and its implications for consumer culture.</i>
<b>Confidentiality</b>	<p><i>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing data in a secure location. All data (including demographic data, interview recordings, transcripts, and photos of shoes) will be stored in a password-protected laptop accessible to only the principal researcher. Your name or any identifiable information will not be included in the final report.</i></p> <p><i>If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</i></p>

<b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b>	<p><i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</i></p> <p><i>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Brandon Wallace</b>  <b>9630 Milestone Way, College Park, MD 20740</b>  <b>Bwallac3@terpmail.umd.edu</b>  <b>715-892-3443</b></p>
<b>Participant Rights</b>	<p><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">University of Maryland College Park  Institutional Review Board Office  1204 Marie Mount Hall  College Park, Maryland, 20742  E-mail: <a href="mailto:irb@umd.edu">irb@umd.edu</a>  Telephone: 301-405-0678</p> <p><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i></p>
<b>Statement of Consent</b>	<p><i>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive and may print a copy of this signed consent form.</i></p> <p><i>If you decide to send the principal researcher a photograph of your customized shoes, the principal researcher may find it useful to include that photograph in the final report or conference presentations, void of any identifiable information. (Mark the statement below that applies to you)</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>I agree that my photograph may be used by the principal researcher in the final research report or conference presentations.</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> <i>I do not want my photograph used by the principal researcher in the final research report or conference presentations.</i></p>

Initials: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

	<i>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below. (For electronic copies, typing name and date will count as a signature)</i>	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>NAME OF PARTICIPANT</b> [Please Print]	
	<b>SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT</b>	
	<b>DATE</b>	

## Appendix D: IRB Approval



1204 Marie Mount Hall  
College Park, MD 20742-5125  
TEL 301.405.4212  
FAX 301.314.1475  
irb@umd.edu  
www.umresearch.umd.edu/IRB

DATE: June 28, 2018

TO: Brandon Wallace, Master  
FROM: University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1280632-1] Mass Footwear Customization and Postmodern Consumer Culture

REFERENCE #:

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: June 28, 2018

EXPIRATION DATE: June 27, 2019

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The University of Maryland College Park (UMCP) IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Prior to submission to the IRB Office, this project received scientific review from the departmental IRB Liaison.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulations.

This project has been determined to be a Minimal Risk project. Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of June 27, 2019.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Unless a consent waiver or alteration has been approved, Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the appropriate reporting forms for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

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